Is capitalism based on the fear of death?
An existential analysis of the capitalist market economy

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1. Why an existential critique?

I concluded yesterday’s conference by insisting on the idea that combining (a) social entrepreneurship with (b) existential economics and (c) spiritual reflection on what it means to be truly human is, today, the only serious way towards a livable post-capitalist economy. The still largely untapped potentials lying dormant in the logic of social entrepreneurship will unfold only if, in parallel, society as a whole is put on the course of a deep-running, sometimes painful existential critique of capitalism.

This is an exercise in practical existential lucidity. Recognizing that our capitalist existence is driven—from deep underneath—by existential anxiety and the fear of death may not be easy. It is bound to resurrect old ghosts, especially the ghost of “religion.” However, there is simply no other way. Our economic existence can be freed of some of its pathologies, and propelled towards a post-capitalist future, only if we combine new economic initiatives (such as social entrepreneurship) with a renewed venture into fundamental anthropological issues. Economists can’t stay away from such issues; if they do, they will miss out on a great opportunity to re-think our economic system radically. If you are—quite understandably—allergic to ideas of revolution or top-down social reform, you need to embrace something like existential economics, unless of course you intend to become an apologist for the capitalist market economy in its current form. If that is so, you had better leave this room now, simply because you will nothing to help you build your case, so that you’ll probably waste your time. (Reading Hayek and espousing his liberal-individualistic view of Man is, to my mind, the best strategy if you want to defend the “virtues” of capitalist markets.) But if you want to imagine a bottom-up revolution of a different kind, you are in the right place.

Let’s embark, then, on a journey through the existential underpinnings of today’s capitalist market economy.

2. The collective and the individual: Capitalist brain-bodies, capitalist consciousness

Capitalism can be analyzed as a system of information transmission between actors, aimed at maintaining and furthering the overarching function of maximizing the profitability of capital. Capitalism can also be analyzed as a cultural experiment of communication of a “spirit” between actors, made up of key values that sustain the capital-maximization process. The systems view and the culture view together provide a mixture of two sorts of functionalism: on the one hand, there is a “system-conservation functionalism” which comes from the fact that, though us individuals, the system in which we exist tends to perpetuate itself and to make us into the sorts of humans it needs; and on the other hand, there is a “human-condition functionalism” which comes from the fact that the system functions to serve some basic traits of our human condition: the system is what it is because, in a certain sense, we want it to be
that way. So there is a twofold causality going from the system towards our human condition, and from our human condition towards the system. Both causal directions are essential to a full understanding of what the capitalist market economy is about—and, especially, an understanding of its endurance and relative stability through change. Systems functionalism alone is not sufficient: how in the world would a system sustain and conserve itself if its components did not in some way “participate” in its functioning and “adhere to” its immanent values? And how would these components internalize the system’s “needs” if not because, to some extent at least, the system responds to, and offers a solution for, some very fundamental features of their “condition”? This issue may make no sense when we discuss the components of physical, biological or formal systems—components who have no actual “condition” except to obey the laws of nature or of logic—but it makes a lot of sense when we discuss the components of the economic system of capitalist markets. That is, we discuss ourselves and our human condition.

Now, of course, the question is, What is meant by “human condition”? When viewing capitalism as a culture, we uncover a very basic scheme that pervades everything: the capitalist culture is—like any human culture—a response to some basic human predicament, and it tends—again, like any culture—to reinforce its way of responding and to “harden” it to the point where humans come to see their existence in the system as their “second nature.” This implies, as we saw, a bi-directional causality going from human nature to system logic and back: that “backward loop” is the effect of the system on us, its human components, and it represents the basic way in which culture is formed. Culture is, as it were, what a system of socioeconomic interaction generates, at the collective level, in the “collective mind,” when it meets the human condition.

Obviously, this characterization of culture as a correlate of the systems logic, this characterization of culture as a system-generated collective mind, would be meaningless if it were not for the existence of an individual mind. Thus, we also have to move from the collective level—the system, the culture—to the individual level: consciousness as well as its correlates in the human brain-organism. The collective dimensions—external and internal—are correlated with individual dimensions, also external and internal. So here we’re going to dwell on that human condition (internal states of consciousness, external organic states and brain states) that is at the root of capitalism, and we’re also going to ask ourselves what sort of humans capitalism has made of us. Remember our basic perspective in our critique of the capitalist market economy: we are capitalist humans coexisting in a capitalist economic system, within a capitalist culture that shows up in us as capitalist brain and body states. Unless this whole complex of dimensions is not taken into account—in an “integral” embrace as Ken Wilber would say—our critique will be lopsided. We need to know what and who we are, as well as where—in what system and in what culture—before we can ask ourselves who, what, and where we wish we were, and how we might get there.

Of course, it is sometimes tricky to distinguish our culture from our consciousness, our self-awareness. Is it not the case that, usually, we are utterly unable to imagine ourselves to any different from what our culture makes us? Is culture not, first and foremost, a set of principles, judgment criteria, values, and worldviews internalized by the subjects that carry it? Do we not routinely talk about such things as “acculturation,” meaning by that the deep rooting of our very subjectivity in the worldview of our society? Conversely, subjective alienation is often linked directly to being uprooted from one’s culture, so that we frequently
speak of an individual’s “cultural identity.” In short, are culture and consciousness not so deeply intertwined that it makes no sense to distinguish them?

This is indeed something that many sociologists and anthropologists have tended to do; it is understandable, of course, since “my” subjectivity and “our” culture are two simultaneously arising aspects of reality—they are the two “interiors” of the individual and the collective dimension of any existing reality. However, it makes a lot of sense to keep them apart analytically because one of the essential aspects of social criticism is, for an individual, to distance himself from the routine worldviews of his culture and to attempt to adopt new ways of being himself—to attempt to reach a new stage of consciousness that tears him away from his culture. To put it bluntly, if the individual interior were so closely conditioned by the external interior that the two formed only one thing, then a Gandhi or a St. Francis of Assisi would never have existed.

Countercultural consciousness, empirically observable in some exemplars of humanity, forces us to break up the often too deterministic framework in which we virtually identify individual consciousness and collective worldview. In fact, one of the deep errors of Marxism was its belief—exacerbated in Leninism, Stalinism, or Maoism—that a change of culture could take place without individual evolution, with the result that “cultural revolutions” were decreed in the name of a new culture to which individuals would bend by necessity. It did not work, and the reason is that individual interiors are not causal appendices of collective exteriors. Of course, the converse is equally true: one cannot hope for a large group of people to individually develop to a higher level of consciousness if one does not, in parallel, facilitate the rise of a new worldview, a new culture.

In this conference, I will discuss the individual aspects of the reality of capitalism. To avoid reductionism, I will neglect neither the biological components of the human condition—which sociobiologists want to put forward as the only determinants of individuality—nor its existential components—which philosophers, especially, want to put forward as the only area where individuality is located and develops.

Capitalism, for sure, is not independent in its overall functioning of the way we are structured as organisms with brains and bodies. Our drives are deeply connected with our organic and mental nature and its specific needs—and note that, here, we will put the brain on the side of the body: it is organic through and through, and no one has ever directly observed consciousness by dissecting a dead brain or, for that matter, by monitoring a live one. But equally, capitalism would not be what it is if it were not for our states and stages of consciousness—the way we perceive ourselves from the inside, the way we subjectively relate to our biological nature, its mortal fragility, its extraordinary resilience, and so on.

Conversely, it’s obvious that we would not be the same sorts of human beings if we had not grown up in a system logic and in a cultural experiment called the capitalist market economy. Neither our consciousness—the way we feel about life and death, the way we perceive the world from inside, and so on—nor our brain-bodies are unaffected by the functioning of capitalism. Concerning this last point, it is not so much that capitalism has accelerated or slowed down “natural” evolution à la Darwin—it has not; but it has certainly made our bodies and brains much more into artefacts than used to be the case in less prosperous, less dynamic, less creative, less productive, and less competitive systems and cultures. All these interdependencies indicate that we can hardly study capitalism in an exhaustive manner without also seeing it (besides being a system of information transmission
and a cultural experiment) as a human, anthropological experiment. The capitalist market economy has been, for better or for worse, not only a civilization project but also a humanization project. We are, indeed, capitalist humans with capitalist brains (and bodies).

3. Dissecting homo capitalisticus

This issue might seem a bit off the mark. On the contrary, it is in fact crucial, but the fact that it can be seen as secondary or even slightly delirious testifies to our deep neglect—especially as intellectuals—for the role played in our daily lives by our “basest,” most “modest” bodily functions.

For centuries, the spiritual traditions of humanity—in particular, Christianity and Buddhism, to name just two of the more venerable ones—have considered that the two basic traits of human existence were, on the one hand, spirit as the higher realm of existence to be striven for and, on the other, flesh as the lower realm of existence to be integrated (or, occasionally, denied or even repressed) and transcended. Sarx, the flesh, was for centuries considered to be made up of two subcategories: the body—soma—and the psyche, sometimes also called mind or soul. Of course, terminologies are always slippery things, and some traditions have preferred to allocate the term “soul” to what other have called “spirit,” and so on. Never mind. What counts is that, at the end of the day, human being-in-the-world was categorized roughly into three “realms”: body, mind, and spirit—soma, psyche, and pneuma. This tripartition went along with a bipartition: sарx or flesh on the one side, composed of soma or body and psyche or soul; and pneuma on the other side. What has since become known as the domain of the “psycho-somatic” indicates that, within the realm of the flesh (of which they are both part), bodily and psychic aspects interact with the psyche having somatic correlates and vice versa. It is equally possible to define a “pneumo-somatic” domain, in which spiritual aspects interact with bodily ones, and a “psycho-pneumatic” domain, in which spiritual and psychic aspects interact. (These two latter domains are much less well known, and even less well accepted, than the domain o the psychosomatic, except for those rare birds among us who study so-called paranormal phenomena such as stigmata, apparitions, netherworld communication, modified states of consciousness, and so on. Needless to say there is not much receptivity for such issues in contemporary science.)

Whatever the case may be, the sарx domain—or “the flesh”—is traditionally made up not only of the body, but of body and psyche. This means that, contrary to what is usually taken into account in economics, there is not one but two “digestive tracts”: the intestine for the body, and the brain’s neural networks for the psyche. Our psychobody—our “flesh”—digests not only material stuff, but also mental stuff. Both material and mental objects are routinely “consumed,” and both are objects of capitalist production, as any advertiser or media expert will readily agree. It is downright impossible to understand modern capitalist consumption—and, hence, also modern capitalist production, innovation, investment, and so on—if one does not see that human beings live just as much on mental nourishments as on physical ones. In that sense, it could be meaningful to see our psychobody as being a combination of a physical body and a mental body—such a representation would do much more justice to the nature of the contemporary capitalist market economy than the old idea that we have a body on the one side (which supposedly consumes material things) and a spirit on the other (which supposedly
detaches itself from matter and is an immaterial and non-consumptive realm). In actual fact, a large portion of even our most material consumption, such as food and drink, gets processed not by the physical body but by the mental body. That is why we can have addictions due to chemical imbalances in our brains: food addictions in the form of bulimia (or its inverted form, anorexia nervosa), and drinking addictions in the form of alcoholism, caffeine dependence, and so on.

The same is true for addictive behaviors on the production or investment side, such as a compulsion to compete, a compulsion to save one’s wealth, or an obsessive drive to earn higher and higher premiums on the market. In all cases, there is an over-investment in some desired physical or mental nourishments.

Such addictions arguably cannot be “built up” entirely by the physical body alone. Of course, they have definite manifestations at the physical level, but they take root in the mental part of our psychosomatic unit. In fact, imagination—the subject’s images of objects as well as the subject’s self-images—plays a central role in addictions even before they become ingrained in the physical body and acquire somatic independence from the psyche. Obviously, images are part of an individual’s interior, they are linked to emotions and judgments, and as such they belong neither to the physical body nor to the mental body; but the chemical processes, the neurological paths and the overall physical-mental states (such as muscular tensions or nervous discharges) that these images generate can be observed and monitored through direct observation, magnetic-resonance images, or electrical waves. Chronic stress due to productivity pressures, durable obesity due to overconsumption of food or attention deficits due to overconsumption of computer time, competition-related fatigue and depression—these and other pathologies are related to the persistence of addictive behaviors, and their psychosomatic “markers” show up in quite a number of human beings in capitalist countries, in the form of—ultimately—chemical unbalances in the physical and/or mental body, in the organism and/or the brain.

Of course, as evolutionary biology has long taught us, chemical processes in the brain also play a very positive role, since they are our most immediate pointers towards risks to avoid, chances to grab, goodies to swallow, and sex to be had. Competition, innovation, work, and consumption all have psychosomatic correlates in the form of brain waves and organic chemistry; this cannot be avoided, for as long as we are living beings. But it can hardly be disputed that in capitalism our body-mind chemistry often goes off-course, and that we become hyperventilated because of production deadlines, get too little serotonin due to stress or too many due to competitive pressures, produce too much gastric juices because of fat processed foods, and so on.

The medical professions tend to take a majority view that medication as well as a “healthier lifestyle” can alleviate these problems, but there is little if any reflection—apart from a few exceptions—on the role played by capitalist market mechanisms and by the capitalist culture in the processes of physical and mental morbidity. Medical circles tend to focus on symptoms (and this, in fact, feeds a good part of the capitalist pharmaceutical industry …), and when there is a reflection on “deeper motivations,” the sociobiological viewpoint usually wins the day: human beings, it is claimed, simply “are like that,” they have drives and instincts and have a hard time putting a check on them; thus, the medical profession has to lend a helping hand so as to keep everyone more or less “functioning.” But what if, we may ask, a significant part of the chemical imbalances in our capitalist
psychobodies were due ... well, to capitalism itself? What if capitalism, while certainly being a response to our “drives and instincts,” as well as to some of our “deeper motivations,” were to be diagnosed as a humanly destructive, or at least unbalanced, response to those drives, instincts, and motivations? To gain some clarity on this matter—which will preoccupy us throughout this course—let us look at what psychosomatic maps contemporary biologists and psychologists have drawn up for us human beings.

Obviously, it will be quite impossible here to go into details, or to be exhaustive. I will merely touch on some of the more predominant pictures of ourselves, highlighting some of the main characteristics that seem to be “wired into” our psychobodies.

What is our current predicament? What is our “condition”? Roughly, there are two broad approaches to this question. One is the sociobiological one, the other is the existential one. They are not necessarily incompatible—indeed, they need to be made compatible since exterior-individual and interior-individual are two facets of the same reality—but they have usually been presented as distinct areas of knowledge.

In a recent synthesis on sociobiology, Harvard Business School academics Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohria have offered a theory (I quote) “about four innate drives—the drive to acquire, the drive to bond, the drive to learn, and the drive to defend—that we believe are central to the nature of all humans, the drives that play a vital role in all human choices. […] We propose that the four drives exist as hard-wired mental modules in the brains of all modern humans as primary drives, not derived from one another.” Notice the somewhat surprising—and, to us here, quite revealing—occurrence of the expression “modern humans”: are the drives to acquire, bond, learn, and defend not common even to sophisticated primates such as chimpanzees? What does any of this have to do with “modernity”? Certainly, the way in which these four drives translate into individual behaviors has changed over the millennia; but in a sociobiological framework such as theirs, the authors cannot really explain why such drives would actually appear with “modern humans.” The interaction of such traits with cultural and systemic changes over time has certainly generated what we could call nowadays a capitalist drive to acquire, a capitalist drive to bond, a capitalist drive to learn, and a capitalist drive to defend—with the added feature well known to both social psychologists and game theorists according to which behavioral patterns tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies: the more individuals develop the capitalist variants of the basic drives, the more these capitalist variants become widespread within the population because within capitalism as a system, the capitalist drives are “optimal responses” to one another (under the assumption, that is, of a non-critical, non-reflexive population). This is probably one of the main ways in which culture—the collective-internal dimension—is influenced, and even shaped, by individual behaviors and systemic constraints—the external dimensions.

But what are these basic drives which Lawrence and Nohria present as our fundamental “individual hardware”? The drive to acquire (which they call “D1”) is rather self-evident; it has to do with the supposedly innate tendency of humans to take and possess, to hold on to material as well as symbolic objects that represent wealth and status, and so on. Property in general, and material possessions in particular, seem to be strongly linked to self-preservation and bodily survival. The drive to bond (“D2”) has to do with basic “togetherness,” the fundamental need of any human individual for companionship, community, and a sense of belonging. It corresponds to the supposedly innate tendency of humans to herd together and also to seek love and recognition, to create families and groups, and more generally to live in
attachment. Here, the authors speak more carefully of the drive’s “manifestations in modern life,” and not of its presence in “modern humans.” This is indeed the correct way to put it: how do these various drives—assuming they are not just “natural” but basic and irreducible—manifest themselves in the capitalist market economy?

The drive to learn (“D3”) has to do with a capacity that can be detected in the very small child: a deep, absorbing curiosity and a so-called “thirst” to acquire new skills, new sights, new sounds, and so on. One might wonder why the authors do not in fact group this together with D1, since the drive to acquire also includes, in their own words, not only objects but also “personal experiences humans value.” The reason they do not do this is not clear, especially in today’s environment where “objects” to be consumed are equally material and mental—a fact that, as we saw, is central in our understanding of the “body” as the organism plus the mental dimensions. Finally, the drive to defend (“D4”) is also rather self-evident; it has to do with protecting one’s possessions, one’s body, and one’s loved ones against threats and dangers from the outside.

Now, it’s striking to notice that if (a) the drive to defend, based on fear, was the very first to develop, if (b) the drive to acquire was generated by the drive to defend as a major way of creating security from threats, and if (c) the drive to learn is in fact a variant of the drive to acquire—as we have argued it might well be, given that our psychobody has a physical and a mental dimension—then in a sociobiological framework fear for one’s life and integrity turns out to be the chief drive behind human existence. Clearly then, capitalist market reality has to be interpreted in this light—not just as a system of interaction, not just as a cultural experiment, but as an anthropological experiment offering a response to the deep-seated, often subconscious, bio-existential fact of fear. D4 may be the root drive underneath D1, D2, and D3. And in fact, D4 itself is rooted in yet more fundamental existential realities which we will discuss in a moment.

Of course, none of this precludes a “positive” reading of everyday life in capitalist market economies. In fact, many aspects of capitalist culture can be traced back to the drives highlighted by Lawrence and Nohria. The drive to acquire is behind capitalism’s extraordinary growth and productivity performance; the drive to learn is certainly a major factor in capitalism’s equally impressive innovation performance. Exuberance and dynamism are central to the system’s norms of interaction and to its incentive structure; Schumpeterian “creative destruction” in capitalist competition would be unthinkable without drives D1 and D3, and so would what financial critic Robert Shiller termed the “irrational exuberance” of the financial markets in the late 1990s. Expansion, enthusiasm, and elation are not at all excluded by the analysis of the four drives; simply, they are always tainted by a nagging doubt as to what is “really” going on underneath: what are the “deeper motives” driving investors, managers, and consumers into exuberant episodes of acquisition, growth, and creation? It is always possible to interpret such occurrences as illustrations of human dynamism, as drives to create and transcend limits, as embodiments of human grandeur; and it is equally possible to interpret them as instances of neurotic-maniacal elation, as cases of extreme anguish covered up by excessive and shrill enthusiasm, as embodiments of human ennui. In fact, both are true and both need to be maintained together. Just because you are fearful and neurotic does not mean that what you accomplish is not grand; but conversely, just because you have accomplished grand things out of deep fear and anguish does not entitle you
to preach to others an ethic of survival of the fittest, of competitive efficiency, and of a duty to be “creative.”

What is at stake here is the existential interpretation of how we live within the capitalist market economy. The standard Marxian view, taken up in more sophisticated terms by the new institutional economists, was that the economy produces people and not just goods and services; we have called this system-preservation functionalism. Along that line, interaction structures as well as cultural values and ideologies help the system to reproduce itself by enrolling people into ways of interacting and ways of seeing the world. The converse view, which is that it is also people who produce the economy—we called this human-condition functionalism—is not so much about how institutions and culture shapes people’s so-called preferences, but rather about how people’s deepest-seated characteristics shape the way they will act and interact. Before seeing how our deepest drives and instincts help produce and reproduce capitalism, let us move from the sociobiological to the existential perspective on the human condition.

From a sociobiological angle, humans are “driven.” They are led on by drives which they try to balance—and this attempt at balance is, itself, only dictated by the “selfish gene” who is seeking to survive by free-riding our human vehicle. In other words, freedom is absent from biological life, except if we call “free” the spontaneous, unthinking acting-out of our built-in drives. From an existential angle, on the contrary, humans are primarily free and this is what causes our difficulties. In a recent book on organizing an “authentic” workplace, business consultants Peter Koestenbaum and Peter Block have offered a good introductory description of what the existential perspective contains. The basic idea is that whereas from the exterior viewpoint of biology none of us is free and seems to be a set of behaviors and chemical-electrical determinations, from the interior viewpoint each of us essentially experiences him- or herself as free and responsible. This does not mean that we are all immediately self-transparent, that we immediately and spontaneously understand who we are; on the contrary, Koestenbaum and Block suggest that before we can have a real understanding of our human condition we need to clear away some preconceived ideas about what “to be human” means. This, however, leads us to uncover a fundamental anxiety. What this experience of anxiety shows us is some of the usually repressed dimensions in our consciousness. This leads to a fundamental thesis inherent in contemporary existential analysis—namely, that our ordinary social and economic lives are conducted on the background of a radical denial of death. Ernest Becker, one of the main promoters of this idea in the 1970s, actually linked this idea very clearly to biology: our organisms, he argued, are intrinsically unable to admit mortality, and non-human animals as well as non-animal organisms are spared any fear of death. What makes humans specific is their self-reflexive consciousness of their own inevitable death—and of the suffering, deterioration, and “self-emptying” that goes along with the process of dying. The fear of death is part of our “organismic” nature but it so happens that what makes up our human nature is the denial of the fear of death.

Clearly, if what makes up our human condition is a mortality that our psychobody is able to radically deny, it is impossible to see this denial of death as just a biological characteristic. In fact, as Becker and the many psychologists and psychoanalysts who have taken up his work have emphasized, what our denial of death essentially drives us to do is to construct socio-cultural systems which lead us to “sublimate” our anxiety into livable and positive motivations. Becker himself calls these socio-cultural systems “hero-systems” because he
views both premodern and modern mankind as a sort of collective “existential hero” who creates cultural symbols and social and economic institutions through which it gives human lives meaning—a sort of everyday “immortality” anchored in motivations which society transmits to people and which the people accept as important and worthy of devoting their lives to them. This implies that our everyday motivations and values, the way in which the socio-economic system makes us act and interact, is really a way of collectively organizing our denial of death. The task of culture and society is, according to Becker, to organize and symbolize away our individual fear of death.

How can human beings live with the interior tension between the desire for immortality and the knowledge of mortality? The answer, says Becker, lies in the search for a conscious life lived without existential lies. In the existential perspective, individuals are to develop what Koestenbaum and Block call “accountability” and Becker calls “openness to experience.” It is a way of living in which we still “play along” in the fictions of culture and social life, but we stop being a burden on others—we stop wanting others to carry our fear of death for us, we give up shoving our anxiety onto other people’s backs. Thus, from the existential viewpoint, the aim of the individual is not to give up all “drives,” but rather to become less of a “driven burden” on others. This requires opening up to an internal force, a creative energy directed not at false, death-denying heroics but at the search for a life that accepts death but at the same time accepts not to be free of the fear of death—a life, in other words, in which there is a conscious fear of death, a lucid consciousness of death as the center of life and thus, at the same time, a life in which the burden of death—on oneself and on others—becomes lighter, not heavier.

Is capitalism conducive to such a path? it is not, in my view. Instead, it makes the individual burden of death ever heavier—and less conscious—by creating a hero-system that focuses on a materialistic and mentalistic way of satisfying the drive to defend. Whatever the case may be, what comes out from this brief foray into existential reasoning is that human consciousness is the locus maximus of the “struggle” between death and Life, between small finitude and Large Infinitude. Our consciousness is the place where, with tools that are not just our bodies and our minds but the whole of our flesh and spirit, the whole of our “sarko-pneumatic” being, we transmute anxiety into (anxiety-accepting) Freedom, the constrictions of death into the (death-accepting) Openness of Life, the small finite moments of conventional existence into the (finitude-accepting) “Timeless Now.” Such expressions are associated today with cheap, commercialized New Age paraphernalia—but in reality they come from the oldest, most time-tested traditions of humankind’s reflection on itself. It is high time that human consciousness and its evolution—from the denial of death to the Stoic acceptance of death to the joyful awakening into Life—was made part of the analysis of the capitalist market economy.

To see why, let us now ask: What does the individual existence of the death-denying, daimon-less, heavily burdened homo capitalisticus look like?

4. Capitalist existence: Homo capitalisticus’s ways of being-in-the-world

To repeat, what I’m after here is a critique of capitalism that is not one-sided: I neither want to portray ourselves as human beings as helpless puppets of “the system,” nor do I want to put
all the weight of accountability, freedom, and flexibility on individuals as if the system had no impact on our lives. The truth lies squarely between these two sides, between system-preservation functionalism and human-condition functionalism. If

*Homo capitalisticus* has a capitalist psychobody and a capitalist level of consciousness. More precisely, he has a capitalist way of actualizing his drives to acquire, to bond, to learn, and to defend. And he has a capitalist way of actualizing his fundamental denial of death, which is the root of the deepest fear he carries inside himself. In a nutshell, this description means that *homo capitalisticus*’s way of being a human in the world is colored, through and through, by the overarching principle of maximum capital profitability and by the implications this principle has in all the relevant areas of existence. To put it differently, the way in which capitalism—as a system, as a culture—answers our basic existential anxieties is through the mechanics and the symbolics of capitalist accumulation and its main avatars, over-competition, overwork, and over-consumption. This generates specific types of psychological dispositions and specific types of social relations.

Let’s start from the most basic level, that of the physical body. Capitalist humans have a body that is both the purveyor of living energy, and the receiver of product and service flows, for the needs of capital. As suggested earlier, our very physical make-up, from the clothing we wear to the health of our organs and cells, is intimately shaped by capitalism. The market only sells us products which will generate maximum profit, regardless of the medium- and long-term effects; for the sake of economic growth, Western and also, more and more, Eastern and Southern populations are ingesting higher and higher calorie intakes, so that obesity is rampant and about to become a sickness of the times. Since food and fluid intake is one of the most basic acts linked to D1 (the drive to acquire) and self-preservation, system-induced alimentary compulsions are particularly difficult to emerge as fully-fledged illnesses.

Another key element of the drive to acquire, linked to shelter and clothing, is being put more and more completely under the realm of capital profitability maximization: the clothes fashion industry and its aggressive branding policies makes our bodies into willing coat-hangers for whatever the designers and marketers have decided has to be sold in each new season. Just like for the food industry, children and youngsters have become choice targets.

In work organization, capitalism shapes individuals’ organisms and brains in definite ways through the imperatives imposed by profit-maximization incentives. The rhythm and structure of tasks has—at least since Charlie Chaplin’s antics in *City Lights*—been a staple theme of social criticism. This is for good reason: Marx’s graphic idea that the worker of his time had become an appendix to the industrial machinery is certainly not a thing of the past, even if the machinery and its way of impacting on our bodies has changed. At the same time, the demands of capital profitability transmitted through both market and command signals have had a tendency to mold a specific sort of capitalist-efficient body-mind that is able to accommodate much quicker working rhythms and has developed adaptive skills unheard of in earlier cultures and systems of economic organization. The discourse on “flexibility” is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, it insists that employees are mere tools for the firm to be maximally efficient and profit-oriented; on the other hand, it rightly points out that adaptability and a quick reaction capacity are essential qualities for an open, even spiritual life. The whole issue is whether—as seems probable—the logic of capitalist incentives does not end up making a mockery of the “genuine flexibility” required for a happy life. *Capitalist*
flexibility seems, on the whole, more mechanizing and alienating than spiritualizing and liberating.

What this shows is that, as can be expected of any system, the capitalist logic and culture have a deep habituating effect on both our physical and our mental bodies: whatever “basic needs” we may have—and of course we have quite a few—are being filtered through by the demands of the profitable accumulation of capital. As indicated earlier, the chemical correlates of capitalism within our physical and mental bodies seem to point rather in the direction of a de-centered, harassed and alienated human being. *Homo capitalisticus* is not, so it seems, and despite the so-called “progress of medicine” which some attribute to the dynamism of the capitalist market economy, a model of psychosomatic health. But then again, neither were his predecessors in earlier systems, so that the issue is not so much “What has gone wrong with our physical and mental health with the advent of capitalism?” but, rather, “What higher stages, in the realm of physical and mental health, is capitalism still keeping us from reaching, despite its pretensions of progress and efficiency?”

Let’s now move more toward the spiritual domain proper (the domain of the *pneuma*), and toward what we could call *homo capitalisticus’s* “being-in-the-world.” What sort of link to the world, and to the other humans, does he have due to his obedience to the demands of capital?

It’s become a truism—but it’s nonetheless very true—that we capitalist humans have developed an exceedingly *instrumental* attitude towards the natural world, the noetic world (of cultures, ideas, etc.), and towards one another. This is quite logical, of course, given the morphology of our system. Whatever can serve to increase profitability is going to be economized, managed and carefully monitored, but whatever does not affect profitability—i.e., whatever is *economically free*—will be squandered blindly. The exact split between what is valuable and what can be squandered will depend on market conditions: if human resources are scarce but raw materials plentiful, as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s, human resource management will be central while natural resource management will not; if, as seems to be more the case since the late 1990s, it is the reverse—with labor being plentiful and crude oil, say, being scarce—a certain carelessness will start to appear in the relations between employers and their workforce (except in those sectors where there are labor supply constraints) while large efforts to stop wasting natural resources will take shape. Such *market-oriented instrumentalism* is, of course, on of the “virtues” applauded by defenders of the capitalist market economy who believe that the combination of market and command incentives that capitalism makes possible is optimal in channeling resources where they can be utilized most efficiently.

This may be true or not—the point can be debated endlessly and capitalism is indeed a powerful set of mechanisms for efficient allocation—but what matters here is the basic existential attitude that emerges: that of a human being indifferent to the world around him except for the “information signals” transmitted to him by the system’s software; a human being who stops wasting a resource only when the market and/or his superiors hit him on the fingers. This is indeed a sort of “adaptive” behavior, but a very *blindly, or at least myopically adaptive behavior* which essentially takes the value of one’s environment—natural and human—to be a function of market prices and profit-oriented commands. Capitalist incentives are not conducive to sensitivity to the intrinsic value of one’s surroundings—in fact, they are often thought to be a substitute for such sensitivity, the assumption being that (*a*) nothing in
the world has any intrinsic value and (b) human beings are “naturally” or spontaneously inclined to be acquisitive, careless beings who need to be “disciplined” into valuing what surrounds them. *Homo capitalisticus* is indeed such a human being. The question that will preoccupy us later on is, Is this the last word on our humanity?

One of the main reasons why the answer is likely to be negative is that, as *homo capitalisticus*, we are partly the product of our system’s twisted and bent ways of answering our basic predicament. The capitalist market economy—to repeat—is both a cause and a result of our current state of consciousness, so that knowing what sorts of humans we are in this system says nothing as to what sorts of humans we could become. It does, however, say something about what sorts of hurdles we will have to overcome to become other humans than those we are now.

Now, the main hurdle as it has emerged from our discussion of the previous section is fear. More than that, it is the fear of death and the ways in which this fear makes us, as Becker put it, a driven burden on others. Fearful actions disguised as “rational” capitalist actions stand little chance of becoming headways into a higher stage of consciousness. Let’s briefly see why.

In consumption, the received wisdom of economists tells us that firms purposefully compete to optimally fulfill the desires of their existing and—even more so—their potential customers. From an existential viewpoint, what occurs rather is an endless exchange of fearful emotions. The customer is seeking to buy goods in order to fill her inner void, her sense of absurdity as described above by Koestenbaum and Block. To do so, she compulsively moves from shop to shop, from firm to firm, in order to chase a “desire” she cannot pin down because her aspirations shift quicker than she can follow them, which leaves her in a constant nostalgia she cannot get rid of; so she keeps shopping. The firm, in turn, is seeking to sell goods in order to stem the tide of anxiety that comes from not knowing what the future has in store. Will we sell enough? Will some competitor come in out the blue and send us crumbling down? Will the Chinese be cheaper? … This deeply open-ended character of the life of a capitalist producer is what drives the creation of marketing, which is a form of external human-resource management designed to make consumers more “consumptive,” in the vocabulary of Baudrillard. Underneath all these apparently exuberant, creative, and adaptive actions and interactions runs a deep current of anxiety and fear.

Let’s look at saving. This is usually seen by conventional economists as the differencing of consumption to some later point in time. Technically, this is perfectly correct; however, again, it neglects the underlying anxiety. Why does an individual save, thereby entrusting his “capital” to capitalist banks who will draw a profit from it? Because he wants to consume later—or because he wants his offspring, who are a symbolic continuation of his own psychobody. This accumulative behavior may be just reasonable in most cases—since there is some likelihood that the person might still be alive at some later date—but very often it is linked to a deep anxiety transformed into a fantasy of immortality: If I save enough, if I transfer my money to some later date—and, once that date arrives, I perhaps transfer it again to yet later—I will feel as if I must rightfully still be there in the future to collect it. In other words, spreading out one’s money over the temporal support may be a way of lessening one’s fear of death, one’s fear of no longer being present in the future. Symmetrically, the prodigal spender who immediately gives all his money to firms and consumes his wealth as it is generated creates for himself a kind of “eternal present” in which he no longer needs to worry
about the future. Thus, compulsive spending fills our inner void by relieving us of the weight of time as it passes from now to death. Both the big saver and the big spender seek to suspend time, to make time irrelevant to their inner experience of existence. This is what routinely happens when people who own money use it—subconsciously—to repress their sense of finitude and dread.

Much the same can be said of investment. Technically speaking, it is merely a transfer of resources. The amounts saved by some are redirected by profit-making banks towards others who are prepared to risk a capitalist project—industrial, commercial, or other. Thus, investment is to production and selling the same sort of “forward projection” (into a time where I will still be there) that saving was to consumption and buying. So the pathologies of investment, for instance in the form of industrial or commercial “empire building,” illustrate what happens when the reality of finitude and death is crowded out from our psyche. The feverish search for new, future opportunities and the obsessive accumulation of concrete realizations—the “empire”—become symbols of the necessity of a future time, a temporal infinity, a kind of imaginary immortality.

Finally, let’s look at competition. Almost independently of the wills of the people involved, the basic logic of competition is to treat each other as “enemies.” Especially in capitalism, this mechanism puts very stringent limits on the extent to which cooperation can develop within competing groups. One can cooperate only within the bounds of what competitive performance allows, and this tolerance is entirely dependent on the “cycle of anxiety” we described between firms and customers. What is more, the individual who figures he can win at the competitive game is easily prone to imagining himself as independent of all others and needing no one, except for the fact that he “needs” others as either instruments or strategic partners. Sure enough, all competition is not pathological since there is such a thing as sane and creative emulation, and since a moderate dose of separation between individuals may also be a good thing. However, pathologies of competition abound even in quite “rational” contexts. Stress is rampant and can reach explosive levels, and overall there is a tendency to exacerbate people’s treatment of each other either as means to an end or as rivals to be eliminated (if not physically, at least symbolically or juridically). Since the overall functioning of capitalism—through the anxieties underlying consumption, saving, and investment—creates a high level of tension within the system, it is only logical that competition becomes the quickest, but also most anxiety-generating, way of relieving those tensions by generating a steady flow of “winners” and “losers.”

This is one of the basic truths about the capitalist way of life: *homo capitalisticus* is a basically anxious being (partly because that is what “to be human” means), but his life in capitalism increases and multiplies that fundamental anxiety, rather than relieving and diminishing it. This is due to the fact that both the market incentives and the command incentives linked to capital’s search for maximum profit create a context in which all individuals need to adapt to one another’s actions in such a way that each person’s fundamental anxiety is “handed around” like a hot potato in the hope that somebody else will shoulder it. We are all involved in being “a driven burden on others,” in Becker’s words. And in a sense, we cannot be blamed for it, since capitalism is after all a system that has not kept its existential promise: instead of giving us “light burdens” (again in Becker’s terms) it gives us heavier ones—even though it seems like it is offering us goods, services, pleasure, variety, creativity, dynamism, and so on. All of this is true, but it does not do away with the fact that
the capitalist-market way of offering us all these good things makes us pay a high price for them, a price Tim Kasser has designated as “the high price of materialism.”

5. The “existential axioms” of capitalist market economies: Today’s and tomorrow’s humanization projects

All this means that we live, in today’s capitalist market economies, as humans who are both highly efficient and deeply truncated. This duality explains why traditional, Marxist approaches to “alienation” have not been completely convincing; they neglect too many of the deeper reasons why capitalist markets have developed as an “existential second-best”—namely, as a system that has strong power of attraction for a human animal ridden by the anxiety of scarcity, suffering, and death.

Thus, our capitalist consciousness is a mixed blessing—but a blessing nevertheless. Very few of us would adhere to a view that would have us move backward in evolution toward less materialistic, but poorer and more unstable, less security-providing economic arrangements. This is not the way the critique of capitalism should proceed. Rather, it should ask how the defects of capitalism’s answers to our human condition can be corrected—how, in other words, how the positive but incomplete aspects of the capitalist humanization project can be brought to complete fruition. This essentially involves the following scheme: to use the transition from the visible to the (still) invisible cultural axioms of capitalism, as offered at the end of the preceding chapter, in order to “transmute” the capitalist way of responding to drives D1-D4 as characterized earlier.

This transmutation involves a new treatment of the basic drives and instincts of humanity—acquisition, bonding, learning, and defending, seen through the “lens” of the fundamental fear of loss, suffering, and death—so as to see whether the internal dynamism that could transform the axioms could also propel individual consciousness toward a new stage or level. Since culture and consciousness are the collective and individual facets of the economy’s “interior,” such a connection between transformed collective axioms and transformed individual axioms necessarily exists.

What would an alternative “being-in-the-world” look like? Capitalist acquisition is at the center of the system. It follows the dictum “What I have, I have” and is based in a very keen, survival-oriented—though most often exaggerated in our wealthy West—experience of scarcity as threat of loss. Capitalist bonding is centered around the idea of cooperation-to-compete (or strategic partnership) and also the idea of sticking together to weather the storm of markets and being prepared to compete with one another at any time if needed. This follows the ideas of “It’s you or me” (that is, competition as a zero-sum game) and of independence and self-reliance. Capitalist learning is efficiency, profitability-based; it consists in exploring those domains that market incentives drive you to explore and being creative where the command incentives allocate your time and energy. Finally, capitalist defense takes the form of preemptive domination (such as when mergers are carried out before the opponent can strike, or when layoffs are made in good times so as to forestall any future bad times) and even preemptive elimination—outdistancing or even destroying your competitor before he has time to build strength.
The table below gathers these axioms into its left-hand column. The right-hand column contains the transformed axioms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual/ existential level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Today’s axioms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tomorrow’s axioms</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What I have, I have”</td>
<td>Renunciation/ “letting go”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s you or me”</td>
<td>Shared finitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence/ self-reliance</td>
<td>Accepted dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profitable knowledge</td>
<td>Search for ontological truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination/ elimination</td>
<td>Care/ “helping to be”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moving from the left-hand to the right-hand column is what I called, at the beginning, the acquisition of existential lucidity. It requires us, as a culture, to embrace the deep-seated fears which underlie our axioms and to seek out new ways—post-capitalist ways—of alleviating those fears. Those fears will never go away because they are part of our human condition; however, if we change our economic system we’ll change the way in which we perceive and alleviate those fears. As I indicated also yesterday, the generalization of social entrepreneurship within a great project of democratic experimentalism could foster such new ways. If we are not move from capitalist mechanisms of fear alleviation to post-capitalist ways of alleviating our existential anxieties.

This, in essence, is my own version of “revolution.” It requires that all of us, all *homo capitalisticus* who are running around on the streets, in our firms and businesses, and in our shopping districts as well as sitting at our government desks—that all those people (you and me, in fact), become what I’d like to call existential activists. Existential activists attempt to change the system by changing their own perception of why the system exists, and why they should stop supporting it. Although I can’t, unfortunately, develop this in full, let me end by showing you the collective/ cultural counterpart of the above individual/ existential axioms:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective/ cultural level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Today’s axioms</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency/ Competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The right-hand columns of these two tables draw a portrait of an economic, cultural and anthropological experiment quite distinct from what capitalism is today. They constitute our critical benchmark with which we can, as existentially lucid citizens—as “existential activists”—face the defects of the left-hand columns, of capitalism as we know it, and as it currently offers to humanize us.

Thank you.