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The Politics of Greed

Being overwhelmed by greed is a state of mind and being that most human beings have experienced at some time in our lives. Most children experience greed in relation to food—endless longing for sweets, longings that lead to hoarding, stealing, or some combination of these. Excessive indulgence in favorite foods, especially sweet ones, by children often leads to sickness. Consequently, many of us learn while quite young that greed has its dangers, that it causes suffering. Most children are taught that excessive desire is bad. Parents, even dysfunctional ones, do not wish to raise a child to be greedy.

These childhood imprints lose power in today's hedonistic consumer culture where the good life has come to be seen as the life where one can have whatever one wants, where no desire is seen as excessive. Beyond childhood squabbles over toys or food where greedy desires to possess and hoard surfaced sometimes, for most folks, religious teachings were the only other place where greed was talked about, where it was deemed sinful and dangerous. The decline of substantive religious practice in contemporary everyday life engendered in part by the worship of technological advancement and our ongoing cultural obsession with progress has practically eliminated any concern with the ethics of greed.

Indeed, as a nation where the culture of narcissism reigns supreme, where I, me, and mine are all that matters, greed becomes the order of the day. While the sixties and seventies can be characterized as a time in the nation when there was a widespread sense of bounty that could be shared precisely because excess was frowned upon, the eighties and nineties are the years where fear of scarcity increased even as a culture of hedonistic excess began to fully emerge. Widespread communal concern for justice and social welfare was swiftly replaced by conservative notions of individual accountability and self-centered materialism. Zillah Eisenstein notes in *Global Obscenities*: “The extremes of wealth and poverty within the united states also mirror the extremes across the globe. The wealthiest 20 percent of u.s. citizens received 99 percent of the total gain in marketable wealth between 1983 and 1989. More than 38 million people live in poverty in the united states, of whom more than 40 percent are under eighteen years of age.” The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer.

Radical young politicians from privileged backgrounds who had sought to intervene on oppressive capitalism became adults who were eager to find and keep their place in the existing economic system. And if this system was fast turning our nation into a world of haves and have-nots with little in between, they wanted to remain in the ranks of the privileged. Once they advocated living simply and sharing resources, now they join their more conservative counterparts in embracing and advocating individual gain over communal good. Together both groups put in place a system of protectionism to further support and perpetuate their diverse class interests.

Since the radicals and/or liberals who had once repudiated class privilege brought to their reclaiming of class power a more open view toward the masses than their ancestors, they were quite willing to let go of old notions, whether rooted in racism or sexism, to exploit the material desires of any group. More than any other group in the nation's history, this group was and is willing to forego allegiance to race or gender to promote

their class interests. If they could make a fortune promoting and selling a product to any group, they were willing to play and prey upon any need or vulnerability that would aid in their accumulation of wealth. Suddenly, spheres of advertising that had always excluded poor and lower-class people had no trouble mining their culture, their images, if it would lead to profit. A new generation of upper and ruling classes had come of age. They were motivated more by the desire for ever-increasing profit than by sustained allegiance to race or gender.

These newly converted fiscal conservatives were different from the generations who preceded them precisely because they had crossed the tracks, so to speak, in that they had not only lived outside the mores of their class of origin, they had a more realistic and experiential understanding of less-privileged groups. While they understood their needs, they also understood their longings. Anyone who spends time with people who are underprivileged and poor knows how much of their energies are spent longing for material goods, not just for the basic necessities of life, but also for luxuries. It is no accident that just as the gap between classes in this nation began to widen as never before, the notion that this is a classless society, where anyone can make it big irrespective of their origins, gained greater currency in the public imagination.

Opportunities for class mobility created by radical political movements for social justice, civil rights, and women's liberation, especially in the workforce, meant that there were individuals who could serve as examples of the popular truism that "anyone can make it big in America." Multimass media has played the central role as the propagandistic voice promoting the notion that this culture remains a place of endless opportunity, where those on the bottom can reach the top. In the areas of sports and entertainment, more and more individual black stars were entering the ranks of the rich. Ironically, the token presence of individual white women and people of color among the rich and powerful was effectively used to validate

the existing social and economic structure by conservatives who had religiously fought to keep them out. By the early eighties the idea that sexism and racism had been eradicated, coupled with the assumption that the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy could work for everybody gained momentum and with it the notion that those groups for whom it did not work were at fault.

Along with the revamped myth that everyone who worked hard could rise from the bottom of our nation's class hierarchy to the top was the insistence that the old notions of oppressor class and oppressed class were no longer meaningful, because when it came to the issue of material longing, the poor, working, and middle classes desired the same things that the rich desired, including the desire to exercise power over others. What better proof of this could there be than calling attention to the reality that individuals from marginal groups who had been left out of the spheres of class power entered these arenas and conducted themselves in the same manner as the established groups—"the good old boys." Once the public could be duped into thinking that the gates of class power and privilege were truly opened for everyone, then there was no longer a need for an emphasis on communalism or sharing resources, for ongoing focus on social justice.

More importantly, there was ample evidence among token marginal individuals who entered the ranks of ruling class privilege that they, like their mainstream counterparts, could be bought—could and would succumb to the corrupting temptations of greed. The way had been paved to bring to the masses the message that excess was acceptable. Greed was the order of the day, and to make a profit by any means necessary was merely to live out to the fullest degree the American work ethic.

In relation to the poor and underclass, this permission to indulge in excess fostered and perpetuated the infiltration into previously stable communities, especially black communities, a predatory capitalist-based drug culture that would bring money for luxuries to a few, a symbolic ruling class. Suddenly-impoverished

communities where life had been hard but safe were turned into war zones. Greed for material luxuries, whether a pair of expensive sneakers, a leather jacket, or a brand-new car, led individuals to prey upon the pain of their neighbors and sell drugs. Many a family starts out disapproving of drug culture but suffers a change of heart when money earned in that enterprise pays bills, buys necessities, and provides luxuries.

Those who suffer the weight of this greed-based predatory capitalism are the addicted. Robbed of the capacity to function as citizens of any community (unable to work, to commune with others, even to eat), they become the dehumanized victims of an ongoing protracted genocide. Unlike the drugs used in the past, like marijuana and heroin, drugs like cocaine and crack/cocaine disturbed the mental health of the addicted and created in them cravings so great that no moral or ethical logic could intervene to stop immoral behavior.

All of us who have lived or live in poor communities know that the addicts in these neighborhoods do not prey upon the rich. They steal from family and neighbors. They exploit and violate the people they know most intimately. Since addiction is not about relatedness, they destroy the affectional bonds that once mediated the hardships of poverty and lack. Contemporary street drug enterprises sanctioned by the government (if they were not, law enforcement would rid our streets of drugs perhaps using some of the millions that go to support the military industrial complex) have done more to promote and perpetuate a culture of greed among the poor than even the propagandistic mass media, which encourages endless consumption.

Drug trafficking is the only economic enterprise that enables a poor person to acquire the means to drive the same cars and wear the same clothes as the rich. Of course, unlike the legitimized beneficiaries of greedy capitalism, these profiteers lack the power to influence government spending or public policy. They function only as a fascist force that brings violence and devastation into what were once stable communities. They

do the work of exploitation and genocide for the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ruling class. Like mercenaries sent from first world nations to small countries around the world, they devastate and destabilize. This is class warfare. Yet the media deflects attention away from class politics and focuses instead on drug culture and youth violence as if no connection exists between this capitalist exploitation and the imperialist economies that are wreaking havoc on the planet.

Mass media, especially the world of advertising, pimps the values of the ruling class to all other groups. A strong organized politicized working class does not exist in the United States today precisely because, through the socialization of mass media, a vast majority of poor and working-class people, along with their middle-class counterparts, learn to think ideologically like the rich even when their economic circumstance would suggest otherwise. This has been made glaringly evident by the response of the public to efforts to end welfare. Lecturing around the country to groups of working people, including black folks, I am amazed when individuals who should know better talk about welfare recipients as lazy predators who do not want to work. Eisenstein contends: "Ending welfare as the united states has known it also kills the idea that we share a public responsibility for one another. The extreme forms of this new poverty constitute the other side of the process of privatization begun a quarter century ago." The folks who wanted to end welfare had little knowledge of the actual dollar amounts spent.

None of these people were willing to look critically at unemployment in this society. They could not let go of their misguided assumptions that jobs are endlessly and always available. Not even the economic crisis that is sorely impacting on their lives at home and at work alerts them to the realities of predatory capitalism. Their lack of sympathy for the poor unites them ideologically with greedy people of means who only have contempt for the poor. Once the poor can be

represented as totally corrupt, as being always and only morally bankrupt, it is possible for those with class privilege to eschew any responsibility for poverty and the suffering it generates.

Greed is the attribute the poor often share with the well-to-do that lends credence to negative stereotypes, which imply that were the poor empowered, they would hold power and exploit in the same manner as the more privileged classes do. Certainly, it is probably true that the greedy poor are unlikely to act in ways more ethical and moral than the greedy rich. Hence the need in mainstream culture to socialize more and more people of all classes, especially the poor, to see greed as essential to making it in this society, as necessary for survival. If at one time individuals were convinced that it's a dog-eat-dog world and only the strong survive, now the message is that survival belongs only to the greedy.

Greed has become the common bond shared by many of the poor and well-to-do. When honest caring citizens, especially our political leaders, are corrupted by longings for fame, wealth, and power, it demoralizes everyone who wants justice for all. Hopelessness generates inactivity. It is not easy to ward off the seductive temptations calling to everyone daily in a culture of excess. Constant vigilance is required to sustain integrity. None of us are exempt. The possibility of greed taking hold in all our psyches is ever present. It can be and often is the oppressor within. Confronting this reality without fear or shame is the only way we garner the moral strength to confront and overcome temptation and corruption.