

CAPX

Is hostility really at the root of capitalism?

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On a couple of previous occasions, I have written about the failures of socialism and about socialism's continued appeal. In those columns, I pointed to research that suggests that at least some socialist instincts, including zero-sum thinking and egalitarian sharing, might be inherent to the design of the human brain. A number of people emailed me to express their skepticism about the "innate" nature of socialism. Isn't socialism, they said, a relatively new phenomenon that arose, in large part, as a response to the perceived "abuses" of capitalism?

As a consolidated, if not necessarily coherent, criticism of capitalism, socialism is certainly new. But, so is capitalism, as we understand it. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, few people talked about either. However, as I will show below, flashes of socialist and anti-capitalist thinking can be discerned all the way back in antiquity, thus pointing to the deep-seated nature of intuitive responses to both economic "systems."

As mentioned, "socialism" and "capitalism" are relatively new, but their basic precepts are not. In so far as capitalism is only the latest iteration of an economic set up based on commerce, private property and profit making, there have always been those who found those three unpalatable.

Consider the following examples. Hesiod, the Greek poet who lived in 8th century BC, believed that human history could be divided into golden, silver, bronze, heroic and iron ages. The defining characteristics of the golden age, he thought, were common property and peace. The defining characteristics of his contemporary iron age were profit-making and violence.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, which was probably written in the 8th century BC, the Greek hero Odysseus is insulted for resembling a captain of a merchant ship with a "greedy eye on freight and profit." According to 5th century BC Greek historian Herodotus, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great dismissed his Spartan enemies by saying,

"I have never yet been afraid of any men, who have a set place in the middle of their city, where they come together to cheat each other and forswear themselves. Cyrus intended these words as a reproach against all the Greeks, because of their having market-places where they buy and sell...."

Writing in the 4th century BC, Plato envisaged an ideal society ruled by "guardians," who had no private property, so as not to "tear the city in pieces by differing about 'mine' and 'not mine.'" He observed that "all the classes engaged in retail and wholesale trade ... are disparaged and subjected to contempt and insults." In the ideal state, Plato averred, only non-citizens should engage in commerce. Conversely, a citizen who becomes a merchant should be punished with

imprisonment for “shaming his family.” Even the hyper-rational Aristotle agreed that “exchange [of goods for profit] is justly condemned because it involves ... profiting at others’ expense.”

In ancient Rome, wrote Professor D. C. Earl of the University of Leeds, “All trade was stigmatized as undignified ... the word mercator [merchant] appears as almost a term of abuse.” In the first century BC, Cicero noted that retail trade is sordidus [vile] because retailers “would not make any profit unless they lied constantly.” The Roman masses shared this attitude. The comedies of Plautus were directed to a mass audience. In them, notes Earl, Plautus “makes frequent reference to the commercial classes, who are invariably treated with hostility and contempt.”

The hostility of Roman Catholic theologians to commerce is well known. Consider the Decretum Gratiani, which was the standard compilation of canon law from the time that Gratian published it in the mid-12th century AD until 1917. Accordingly, “Whoever buys something ... so that it may be a material for making something else, he is no merchant. But the man who buys it in order to sell it unchanged ... is cast out from God’s temple.”

Protestant theologians agreed. According to the economic historian R. H. Tawney, Martin Luther “hated commerce and capitalism.” In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx approvingly quotes Luther as saying, “Great wrong and unchristian thievery and robbery are committed all over the world by merchants.” And John Calvin noted that the life of the merchant closely resembles that of a prostitute, for it is “full of tricks and traps and deceits.”

Idealized societies that various thinkers have imagined throughout the ages tended to share the prejudices of the ancients. Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of Henry VIII of England, coined the word “utopia” in a book of the same name. In More’s *Utopia*, both money and private property were abolished.

Over the succeeding centuries, humanity periodically acted on its revulsion toward trade, private property and profit making. Some experiments, such as those of 15th century Bohemian Taborites and 17th century Plymouth Colonists, were inspired by the Christian religion. Others, like Robert Owen’s 19th century experiments in New Harmony, Indiana, and New Lanark, Scotland, were not. In the end, all such experiments failed amid discord and poverty.

This, by necessity truncated, look at the past clearly indicates the ancient roots of human hostility toward some of the most important features of capitalism. To explore this topic further, I have organized a policy forum on “Socialism and Human Nature,” which will take place at the Cato Institute on September 14 at 11am.

The forum will feature three well-known thinkers: Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership at the New York University; John Tooby, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California–Santa Barbara; and Leda Cosmides, Professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of California–Santa Barbara. Our panel will further explore the evolutionary origins of these impulses and I will write about our conclusions in a future column.

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