

Welcome to the Asylum: Capitalism, a Ceaseless and Futile Quest for Money and Goods

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Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#)

Global Research, April 30, 2012

truthdig.com 30 April 2012

When civilizations start to die they go insane. Let the ice sheets in the Arctic melt. Let the temperatures rise. Let the air, soil and water be poisoned. Let the forests die. Let the seas be emptied of life. Let one useless war after another be waged. Let the masses be thrust into extreme poverty and left without jobs while the elites, drunk on hedonism, accumulate vast fortunes through exploitation, speculation, fraud and theft. Reality, at the end, gets unplugged. We live in an age when news consists of Snooki's pregnancy, Hulk Hogan's sex tape and Kim Kardashian's denial that she is the naked woman cooking eggs in a photo circulating on the Internet. Politicians, including presidents, appear on late night comedy shows to do gags and they campaign on issues such as creating a moon colony. "At times when the page is turning," Louis-Ferdinand Celine wrote in "Castle to Castle," "when History brings all the nuts together, opens its Epic Dance Halls! hats and heads in the whirlwind! Panties overboard!"

The quest by a bankrupt elite in the final days of empire to accumulate greater and greater wealth, as Karl Marx observed, is modern society's version of primitive fetishism. This quest, as there is less and less to exploit, leads to mounting repression, increased human suffering, a collapse of infrastructure and, finally, collective death. It is the self-deluded, those on Wall Street or among the political elite, those who entertain and inform us, those who lack the capacity to question the lusts that will ensure our self-annihilation, who are held up as exemplars of intelligence, success and progress. The World Health Organization calculates that one in four people in the United States suffers from chronic anxiety, a mood disorder or depression—which seems to me to be a normal reaction to our march toward collective suicide. Welcome to the asylum.

When the most basic elements that sustain life are reduced to a cash product, life has no intrinsic value. The extinguishing of "primitive" societies, those that were defined by [animism](#) and mysticism, those that celebrated ambiguity and mystery, those that respected the centrality of the human imagination, removed the only ideological counterweight to a self-devouring capitalist ideology. Those who held on to pre-modern beliefs, such as Native Americans, who structured themselves around a communal life and self-sacrifice rather than hoarding and wage exploitation, could not be accommodated within the ethic of capitalist exploitation, the cult of the self and the lust for imperial expansion. The prosaic was pitted against the allegorical. And as we race toward the collapse of the planet's ecosystem we must restore this older vision of life if we are to survive.

The war on the Native Americans, like the wars waged by colonialists around the globe, was waged to eradicate not only a people but a competing ethic. The older form of human community was antithetical and hostile to capitalism, the primacy of the technological state

and the demands of empire. This struggle between belief systems was not lost on Marx. "The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx" is a series of observations derived from Marx's reading of works by historians and anthropologists. He took notes about the traditions, practices, social structure, economic systems and beliefs of numerous indigenous cultures targeted for destruction. Marx noted arcane details about the formation of Native American society, but also that "lands [were] owned by the tribes in common, while tenement-houses [were] owned jointly by their occupants." He wrote of the Aztecs, "Commune tenure of lands; Life in large households composed of a number of related families." He went on, "... reasons for believing they practiced communism in living in the household." Native Americans, especially the Iroquois, provided the governing model for the union of the American colonies, and also proved vital to Marx and Engel's vision of communism.

Marx, though he placed a naive faith in the power of the state to create his workers' utopia and discounted important social and cultural forces outside of economics, was acutely aware that something essential to human dignity and independence had been lost with the destruction of pre-modern societies. The Iroquois Council of the [Gens](#), where Indians came together to be heard as ancient Athenians did, was, Marx noted, a "democratic assembly where every adult male and female member had a voice upon all questions brought before it." Marx lauded the active participation of women in tribal affairs, writing, "The women [were] allowed to express their wishes and opinions through an orator of their own election. Decision given by the Council. Unanimity was a fundamental law of its action among the Iroquois." European women on the Continent and in the colonies had no equivalent power.

Rebuilding this older vision of community, one based on cooperation rather than exploitation, will be as important to our survival as changing our patterns of consumption, growing food locally and ending our dependence on fossil fuels. The pre-modern societies of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse—although they were not always idyllic and performed acts of cruelty including the mutilation, torture and execution of captives—did not subordinate the sacred to the technical. The deities they worshipped were not outside of or separate from nature.

Seventeenth century European philosophy and the Enlightenment, meanwhile, exalted the separation of human beings from the natural world, a belief also embraced by the Bible. The natural world, along with those pre-modern cultures that lived in harmony with it, was seen by the industrial society of the Enlightenment as worthy only of exploitation. [Descartes](#) argued, for example, that the fullest exploitation of matter to *any* use was the duty of humankind. The wilderness became, in the religious language of the Puritans, satanic. It had to be Christianized and subdued. The implantation of the technical order resulted, as Richard Slotkin writes in "Regeneration Through Violence," in the primacy of "the western man-on-the-make, the speculator, and the wildcat banker." Davy Crockett and, later, George Armstrong Custer, Slotkin notes, became "national heroes by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust."

The demented project of endless capitalist expansion, profligate consumption, senseless exploitation and industrial growth is now imploding. Corporate hustlers are as blind to the ramifications of their self-destructive fury as were Custer, the gold speculators and the railroad magnates. They seized Indian land, killed off its inhabitants, slaughtered the buffalo herds and cut down the forests. Their heirs wage war throughout the Middle East, pollute the seas and water systems, foul the air and soil and gamble with commodities as half the

globe sinks into abject poverty and misery. The Book of Revelation defines this single-minded drive for profit as handing over authority to the “beast.”

The conflation of technological advancement with human progress leads to self-worship. Reason makes possible the calculations, science and technological advances of industrial civilization, but reason does not connect us with the forces of life. A society that loses the capacity for the sacred, that lacks the power of human imagination, that cannot practice empathy, ultimately ensures its own destruction. The Native Americans understood there are powers and forces we can never control and must honor. They knew, as did the ancient Greeks, that hubris is the deadliest curse of the human race. This is a lesson that we will probably have to learn for ourselves at the cost of tremendous suffering.

In William Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” Prospero is stranded on an island where he becomes the undisputed lord and master. He enslaves the primitive “monster” Caliban. He employs the magical sources of power embodied in the spirit Ariel, who is of fire and air. The forces unleashed in the island’s wilderness, Shakespeare knew, could prompt us to good if we had the capacity for self-control and reverence. But it also could push us toward monstrous evil since there are few constraints to thwart plunder, rape, murder, greed and power. Later, Joseph Conrad, in his portraits of the outposts of empire, also would expose the same intoxication with barbarity.

The anthropologist [Lewis Henry Morgan](#), who in 1846 was “adopted” by the Seneca, one of the tribes belonging to the Iroquois confederation, wrote in “Ancient Society” about social evolution among American Indians. Marx noted approvingly, in his “Ethnological Notebooks,” Morgan’s insistence on the historical and social importance of “imagination, that great faculty so largely contributing to the elevation of mankind.” Imagination, as the Shakespearean scholar Harold C. Goddard pointed out, “is neither the language of nature nor the language of man, but both at once, the medium of communion between the two. ... Imagination is the *elemental speech* in all senses, the first and the last, of primitive man and of the poets.”

All that concerns itself with beauty and truth, with those forces that have the power to transform us, is being steadily extinguished by our corporate state. Art. Education. Literature. Music. Theater. Dance. Poetry. Philosophy. Religion. Journalism. None of these disciplines are worthy in the corporate state of support or compensation. These are pursuits that, even in our universities, are condemned as impractical. But it is only through the impractical, through that which can empower our imagination, that we will be rescued as a species. The prosaic world of news events, the collection of scientific and factual data, stock market statistics and the sterile recording of deeds as history do not permit us to understand the *elemental speech* of imagination. We will never penetrate the mystery of creation, or the meaning of existence, if we do not recover this older language. Poetry shows a man his soul, Goddard wrote, “as a looking glass does his face.” And it is our souls that the culture of imperialism, business and technology seeks to crush.

[Walter Benjamin](#) argued that capitalism is not only a formation “conditioned by religion,” but is an “essentially religious phenomenon,” albeit one that no longer seeks to connect humans with the mysterious forces of life. Capitalism, as Benjamin observed, called on human societies to embark on a ceaseless and futile quest for money and goods. This quest, he warned, perpetuates a culture dominated by guilt, a sense of inadequacy and self-loathing. It enslaves nearly all its adherents through wages, subservience to the commodity culture and debt peonage. The suffering visited on Native Americans, once Western

expansion was complete, was soon endured by others, in Cuba, the Philippines, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. The final chapter of this sad experiment in human history will see us sacrificed as those on the outer reaches of empire were sacrificed. There is a kind of justice to this. We profited as a nation from this demented vision, we remained passive and silent when we should have denounced the crimes committed in our name, and now that the game is up we all go down together.

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