

AMERICAN MISERY

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AMERICAN MISERY: CAPITALISM'S CULPABILITY AND OUR NEW OPIATES

Americans are significantly more miserable, anxious and socially isolated than in prior decades. Popular explanations do not adequately explain the culture of despair plaguing contemporary America; and contemporary opiates, manifesting in record levels of anti-depressant and anxiety medication, do little to effectively help hobbled Americans get through each day. Therapy of every ilk has become de rigueur. Rarely, though, does anyone examine that which is otherwise *fait accompli*—capitalism.

Liberal arguments, such as disabled social services, increased work hours and hyper-consumerism are necessary, but not sufficient explanations. Rather than causing social malaise, recent social and economic trends, including social media and high divorce rates, are additional manifestations of the broader underlying problem inherent therein. In his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Karl Marx notes that capitalism creates alienation from self, others and what it means to be human—our ability to work and contribute to our own and others' well-being. The widespread estrangement Marx predicted is indeed the dark picture depicted by current statistics.

Our collective despair is not a personal state of mind in need of individual therapy, but rather a symptom of prevailing social relations incurred and expanded by contemporary Supercapitalism, to use Robert Reich's apt appellation. An analysis of the statistical portrait of common misery, as well as unsatisfying but popular explanations of such, reveals more acutely the predicament of 21st century America.

Between 1985 and 2004, the number of people with whom the average American discussed "important matters" shrank from approximately three to two. The number of Americans who said there was no one with whom they discussed important matters nearly tripled; and fifty percent of our population has "inadequate support."¹ Increasing social isolation in the United States accompanies escalating rates of depression and anxiety. Depression among

¹ McPherson et al. 353-354.

Americans is ten times higher than it was in the beginning of the twentieth century and depression occurs at increasingly younger ages. Suicide has quadrupled since the 1950s.²

The capitalist mode of production and its accompanying social relations is not new to the United States and therefore it is worth examining how happy Americans were in earlier decades. While happiness has decreased since the 1970s, we were not then a particularly happy population; D.G. Blanchflower and A.J. Oswald wrote that approximately 2 of 3 Americans said they were not particularly happy. The excesses of late industrial capitalism since Reaganomics have been blamed by many scholars for creating increased anxiety and social isolation, but indicators of despair reflect a more pervasive malaise among Americans, which may well be connected to the economic system itself, not just the unleashing of deregulated free enterprise. In other words, the normative unhappiness and stress endemic to capitalism is likely made worse as free competition expands; but capitalism, even at its best flourishes in anxiety and depression. People feel driven to consume goods and services that give them the illusion of fulfilling relationships. Cars, clothes and houses reference confidence, beauty and social status—goals already sorely removed from profound needs regarding connecting to self and others. Our economic system expands when we are most dissatisfied, and therefore willing to buy products, or object-signs as per Jean Baudrillard, that do little more than display to others a false picture of relief from disenchantment.

While some increase in depression and anxiety may be connected to more media attention, the numbers paint a gloomy picture of Americans' emotional and social lives. Whether or not despair has increased as dramatically as statistics suggest, it is clear that Americans are not doing well. Why are Americans so isolated and unhappy? It is worth first examining some popular explanations that take an apolitical or liberal approach.

² Twenge

EXPLANATIONS FOR DECLINES IN FRIENDSHIP AND WELL-BEING

There are four recurring explanations used by scholars to explain contemporary malaise 1) hyper-independence; 2) divorce; 3) social media; and perhaps most important 4) hyper-competition.

Hyper-independence: America's over-emphasis on individualism, independence and self-reliance has been blamed for increased social isolation and loneliness. These values, when taken to their current extreme, breed misery.

Interdependence has been stigmatized and viewed systemically as unmanly, even un-American. People are reluctant to say they are lonely, suggest psychiatrists Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz, because they do not want to be seen as needy. Connecting with others and sharing feelings is often considered not just inappropriate, but inconsiderate. Today a person who "shares" is quickly dismissed for conveying too much information "TMI," "dumping," "whining" or "being self-indulgent." As far back as 350 B.C. though, Aristotle proclaimed our needs as "social animals." Yet at every turn we are expected to handle everything on our own lest we be perceived pathologically dependent.

While many blame depression on pre-existing chemical imbalances, research suggests instead that social isolation is an increasingly common causal precursor. Anti-depressants and anxiety medications may help us feel better, but they do nothing to solve the anguish; instead we need help as a society to connect with one another. In the era of *Bowling Alone* (1995) and *The Lonely American* (2009) which explain that twenty-first century malaise comes from decreased social connections, we need more than the latest opiate, prescribed or otherwise—or soma as per Aldous Huxley's prediction in his dystopia, *Brave New World* (1932)— to make each day bearable.

Divorce: The increasing divorce rate is blamed for today's depression, anxiety and isolation; and many divorces surely also stem from America's focus on hyper-independence. Marriage has decreased from about 90% in the 1920s to 30% today, while divorce hovers at 50% according to a 2013 study by Bowling Green State University's National Center for Marriage and Family; and yet, marriage and family are still the only accepted institutionally recognized interdependent relationships in the U.S. Since there are few official relationship alternatives, it makes sense that reported well-being trends, as Blanchflower & Oswald write, rise in a lasting marriage and decline in the midst of divorce. The General Social Survey 2004 suggests that married couples are the only

demographic who are more socially connected than they were in the eighties. Yet without a supportive system of friends or community, marriage is also more likely to implode. Couples reach out to friends and extended family less—and are expected to rely more on one another to fulfill each other's economic and emotional needs. The pressure is more than most marriages can bear. With disabled social programs Americans are more dependent on two-income families and yet have no extra childcare or other supports to make these contemporary necessities manageable. Financial strain buries one marriage after another as families are expected to shoulder more burden and government less.

Social media: New technologies are blamed too for increased despair. Several studies suggest that social media erodes capacities to create and develop face-to-face relationships. This trend also relates to over-valuing independence and self-reliance. Even when we do reach out to one another, we are expected to defer our emotional needs. Whatever care and compassion we receive will be given on the other person's timetable, when they have a chance to text or email back an encouraging word.

Depression develops as we feel pressured to be unemotional, tough, casual and/or callous in our relationships. People construct false images to avoid the vulnerability inherent in sharing an unplanned non-technological moment face-to-face. "Fauxting" or pretending to text to avoid talking to someone in a given moment, often takes place because people fear appearing lonely or unpopular. Awkward encounters or possible inferences that we are alone or not liked can be damaging to a carefully guarded and constructed image of being attractive, popular and of high status. A damaged reputation is perceived as worse than the potential benefits of an actual intimate in-person face-to-face moment.

Further, technology is often used to harass. Cyber-bullying among youth is increasing and leads to truancy, eating disorders, depression, substance abuse and suicide. Yet children and teens are often willing to withstand such painful abuse. Many say they are afraid that if their cyber-abuse experiences are discovered, their parents will prevent them from using their computers and phones which would isolate and disconnect them from their peers even more. Adults cyber bully as much as young people do, against colleagues, family and others. Common techniques include low-level incivility such as copying others on emails to expose a message clearly meant for a particular recipient, as well as escalated activities considered criminal especially electronic harassment and stalking. Yet adults and youth alike often endure

hurtful virtual experiences since relating to one another through technology has become our dominant and sometimes sole social medium.

The superficial cyber relationships endemic to social media is also reflected in a decrease in intimacy. Young people increasingly expect their sexuality to remain light and casual. They often fear being seen as too emotional or “needy” and thus navigate their sexual interactions towards dispassion. Contemporary phrases describe this phenomenon: “Friends with benefits” or “hooking-up.” Youth rarely seek out nor find the intimacy today that humans otherwise crave.

Hyper-competition: Another force blamed for high depression and anxiety is the so-called self-esteem movement. Increased depression among youth is blamed on teachers and parents who dole out free praise like welfare, according to Jean M. Twenge who laments that children are accepted unconditionally and congratulated for just being “who they are.”³ For Twenge these undeserved accolades are akin to what a laissez-faire economist might call a “hand-out” suppressing incentive for hard work and effort.

Twenge’s concern is perplexing however as floods of research find that contemporary pressure on young people to pursue success at the expense of others is creating record levels of depression and anxiety—especially wealthy youth who are pushed even harder by ivy league obsessed families. Much of the strain parents and schools place on children stems from Supercapitalism.

Reaganomics spurred our more laissez-faire political and social culture and dismantled and crippled social and economic supports. Less regulation on competition and business endeavors and more room to become as powerful and successful as possible translates to increased pressure to sink or swim. The wealthiest 1 percent today captured 95 percent of the post-financial crisis growth since 2009, while the bottom 90 percent became poorer; thus, more sinking than swimming.

The Pew Research Center (2013) says U.S. income inequality increased steadily since the 1970s and has reached levels not seen since 1928. In 1928 the top 1 percent of families received 23.9% of all pretax income, while the bottom 90% received 50.7%. By 1944 the top 1 percent’s share was 11.3% while the bottom 90% received 67.5%; Roosevelt’s New Deal used taxes to

³ Twenge 2006, 57.

offer Americans safeguards against poverty, poor health and other hardships and began to even out the playing field. When the New Deal came under attack in the late seventies, the top 1 percent found their incomes rise as the bottom 90% would plummet. By 2012 the top 1 percent received nearly 22.5% of all pretax income, while the bottom 90%'s share hit an historical low—below 50%. As competition is increasingly freed, inequality expands, people are pressured more, and depression and anxiety rates fly high.

People are expected to think only of themselves and their needs in order to succeed in business or other endeavors. Stomping on others in the process is now seen as a necessary evil. Many CEOs for instance, have become powerful on the backs of other workers. One study attests to the level of insanity and narcissism necessary to make it at the high ranks of American capitalism. In the book, *The CEO as Psychopath*, P. Carlson explains that many politicians and CEOs succeed because they are “egocentric, exploitative and lacking in empathy”—in short, “successful psychopaths.”

Madeline Levine blames the high rate of depression among young people on what she calls “the toxic brew of pressure and isolation”—pressure to achieve and isolation from parents.⁴ Children’s grown-ups are pressured to work and become successful in their careers, either for economic survival or to attain and maintain unforgiving social expectations. Levine argues that teens are not drowning in a sea of adoration and empty praise by adults’ intent on raising self-esteem as Twenge laments. Instead, Levine finds teens strangled by crushing stress imposed by parents and schools. Adults (and often peers) are unwilling to accept young people (or adults) unless they perform better than everyone else on a series of multi-faceted and complex barometers, including academics, sports, extra curricula and popularity. In the latter, youth are not encouraged to have friends per se—but to be known, revered and to wield social influence. Teens often find the pressure unbearable. Groomed to be powerful and comparably miserable adults, many choose to end their lives early as abysmal suicide statistics tragically suggest. Contrary to popular assumptions, depression and anxiety are highest among wealthy youth, writes Levine. Research suggesting that children are over-pressured parallels similar studies on this trend among adults. Neither adults nor children are praised often. They are more often pushed harder to succeed and produce, and often beyond their emotional and physical capacities. As Americans are driven to reach higher for increasingly distant stars, to have it all, and despair statistics skyrocket.

⁴ Levine 28.

The drive to acquire things drowns out the space to develop fulfilling relationships and strong communities. Demographic scattering occurs as people pursue college and then job prospects, leaving the communities where they were raised. College students feel pressured to leave home to start their lives far from their families. Increasingly their children are raised by babysitters rather than the proverbial village with family and friends who would otherwise help in less production-focused times. When people travel far from loved ones to pursue American priorities such as education and career, depression and loneliness are perhaps unintended, but expected consequences.

Further, as the U.S. becomes more obsessed with outcomes, punctuality is valued more than relationships. Coming late is considered rude, disrespectful and a sign of laziness, bad character or even emotional disturbance—perhaps “Attention Deficit Disorder.” Yet to prioritize time as we do, respectful, caring relationships are necessarily depreciated. Instead people become careless, undependable and even depressed as we debase our friendships in order to get to our sequential commitments. If we pass a person who needs our help, a homeless person in need or even a friend, a quick calculation yields little revenue when weighed against the costs and benefits of arriving late to work or school. Simply, if we “over” value our friendships and community, our worth to the market system plummets.

Increased stress and exhaustion also develop from the longer working hours and related overspending demanded of Americans, according to Juliet Schor in her seminal books, *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*, at levels much higher than our European counterparts. These extra hours on the job mean that working Americans are likely to spend their additional income on consumer items—appliances (i.e. microwaves) and service workers (i.e. housekeepers and babysitters) in order to keep up with the longer work time expected from them on evenings and weekends.

We also have record levels of credit card debt and personal bankruptcy. The average American works 200 hours, or five weeks more per year than they did thirty years ago, longer hours than any other country in the industrialized world.

In a related matter, we are more likely today to cut corners in every sphere of our cultural, economic and political life so as not just to “keep up with the Joneses,” but just to keep up with the bills. At the same time as new expectations strangle most Americans’ daily life, the upper percent feel pressure to surpass the Joneses. As such, a cheating culture has emerged,

demonstrated by trends in sports (steroids) law (billing extra hours) finance (insider trading), and among students and teachers (cheating on exams) as documented by David Callahan in his book, *The Cheating Culture*.

Along with hyper-competition is also a tougher attitude toward those who might struggle financially or otherwise show signs of trouble. Language such as the *war* on crime, and the *war* on drugs are indicative of “get tough” laws that returned with the death penalty in the eighties, along with longer prison sentences, and the increasing adjudication of youth in adult criminal courts which have collectively contributed to the mass incarceration endemic to twenty-first century America.

Young people, whether processed through the criminal justice system or making their way through average schools, confront the “sink or swim” ethos of our larger culture. Zero tolerance policies in schools mean that youth are severely punished, excluded from school in the form of suspensions and expulsions, for minor infractions. The result is increased nihilism—and what Elliott Currie refers to as *The Road to Whatever*.

Increased depression, anxiety and social isolation expand in relationship to increases in consumerism and unforgiving social and economic pressures as well as dismantled social supports. Similarly values related to the current U.S. economy—hyper-individualism, hyper-independence, hyper-competition and hyper-self-reliance have become defining hallmarks of contemporary U.S. capitalism.

Laissez-faire economists argue for little if any social supports. Other conservative perspectives suggest that tougher expectations without handouts, emotional or financial, are necessary to reverse despair statistics. Yet overwhelming research shows that this strict, punitive approach is itself fueling our soaring depression and anxiety statistics.

In contrast, more progressive capitalists tend to believe that when people are having a hard time economically, the government should provide a “helping hand.” Interdependence and compassion are promoted as alternatives to today’s ruthless competition. These perspectives, considered extremely liberal in the U.S., are more conservative than the typical approach in many European countries, where everyone is entitled to government-supported health care, prenatal care, childcare, paid parental leave, elderly care and higher education, as a national right, regardless of need.

Popular recommendations in this country suggest that increasing (or decreasing) social supports and economic regulation are enough to increase Americans' well-being. Yet they miss a fundamental tenet of capitalist economies: The drive for profit motivates production at the expense of others' well-being. Americans are persuaded that they are too fat, poor, unpopular or otherwise defective without a particular purchase. Capitalism flourishes with increasingly manufactured miseries. No one buys unless they feel incomplete—a hole that we are persuaded an expensive car, watch, bag, boots or phone will mend.

For this reason perhaps, even though Scandinavian countries with high economic and social supports are considered happier than the United States, high rates of depression are still evident in many of Europe's mixed economies, which combine capitalist consumerism with substantial social supports. U.S. people rate significantly less happy than our Scandinavian counterparts and the happiest countries are those with the most social supports, writes Sauter et al., including Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden. Though even Scandinavians, who enjoy greater economic equality than we have in the U.S., and boast generous family-leave policies and healthcare; and who are ranked among "the happiest on earth"—still have high suicide rates. Indeed, inequality still persists; and when people compare themselves to neighbors or media images that seem better off, depression increases.

In these societies, as in our own, the alienation Karl Marx described in his 1844 Paris Manuscripts still persists.

To the left of European mixed economies lies an explanation that most accurately predicts Americans' high depression, anxiety and social isolation. Hyper-competition and deregulated capitalism explain why anxiety and depression have increased, but suggest little about why anxiety, depression and social isolation have been high historically in American society, and these explanations fall further short when it comes to solutions.

The following discussion addresses the unexplained mystery regarding why human misery is both higher today and why it continues to persist. Capitalism may be the undiagnosed culprit. We experience alienation from our selves, others and from what makes us distinct as human-beings—our ability to contribute to the well-being of ourselves and others.

A BROADER ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY ALIENATION:

To understand why despair has increased in the United States, we need to return to seminal sociological thinkers—especially Karl Marx, but also Emile Durkheim. In Durkheim's groundbreaking *Suicide* (1897) he noted that high suicide rates flag dysfunctional social structures. When a society is working, people tend to get their economic and social needs met, and suicide rates are low; when the social and economic system is amiss though, suicide rates soar.

When suicide exists at high levels as it does today, there is a need to move beyond individual-oriented psychology. In America, we tend to blame ourselves and/or our families for our despair. Durkheim instead posited that high rates of suicide indicate a pervasive problem in the larger social, political and economic framework.

Given the statistics today—Durkheim's concerns deserve renewed attention. To cope with a growing culture of misery, the Disease Control Center and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (2011) reports that Americans are taking anti-depressants at a rate 400 percent greater than in the nineties.

The suicide rate, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in the United States, is 12 per 100,000. From 1999 to 2010, the suicide rate among Americans aged 35 to 64 increased nearly 30 percent.

Too little integration plagues us today—what Durkheim describes as a risk for high rates of *egoistic* suicide. We are more likely to seek divorce, leave a job or move to another location than in generations past. There is little that connects us to one another, neither through moral obligation nor cultural expectations. While in the past all may have been fair in love and war—today this extends to work, the baby and the bath water.

The dissolution of marriage in particular, without any alternative in its place, contributes to egoistic suicide. People more quickly contemplate divorce since there is less reverence for matrimony, which for Durkheim, increases the likelihood of suicide. Marriage, according to recent studies, reduces rates of suicide by half. Thus the dissolution of marriage, our central, though withering institution for engaging intimacy, tends to lead to increased individuation, a component of egoistic suicide. Social integration continues to break down and people have less community. Were there other forms of socially acceptable intimate relationships, then people could have multiple

opportunities for developing meaningful close connections with one another. Friends, though, are routinely deprioritized as free time becomes scarce. People barely have time for the increased demands of work and family, and thus other companionship becomes a luxury few can afford. Friendship itself is in sharp decline according to the General Social Surveys 1985 to 2004. With marriage as our sole, yet disappearing, intimate institution, little opportunity for authentic relationships remain.

Anomic suicide is marked by low regulation in a society. One's ability to pursue private interest leads to less personal satisfaction as the possibility for success becomes limitless. When each accomplishment generates the need for more success, satisfaction becomes fleeting. Durkheim writes that needs must be proportioned sufficiently to means. When people compare themselves to the rich and famous lifestyles depicted in international media, means almost always fall short.

For a broader analysis regarding the U.S. emotional crisis, Marx and neo-Marxists reveal insights that have too long been ignored or dismissed. A cooperative, interdependent and integrated society is necessary for personally fulfilling relationships with self and others as Durkheim and many other important thinkers suggest. Marx explained why capitalism, let alone Supercapitalism, can't accomplish the fundamental tenets for a high functioning compassionate and civilized society.

Many of the liberal analyses regarding why despair has increased failed to question the foundation of contemporary economics and thus largely address cohabiting symptoms rather than systemic causal factors. Humans, as spiritual and intellectual beings, are denied access to their humanity as a result of the objectifying nature of capitalism. In successful capitalist economies, people are objects in production, a commodity like any raw material, to be acquired or disposed as our use enhances or degrades potential for profit. In contrast, in the society Marx envisioned, humans are expected to develop their potential as a species being—what Marx called man's "spiritual essence, his *human* being."⁵

The oppressive states that have called themselves communist, including the former Soviet Union and China, came nowhere near the spiritually connected and life-affirming communities Marx imagined. The failure of these

⁵ Marx 1844b: 63.

revolutions was due to many factors, but not least to a lack of transformation in consciousness before uprisings took place. Revolution must be organized by “freely associated men” according to Marx. Forcing people to accept collectivism through suppressed speech and lethal punishment as occurred in these countries, necessarily undermined the vision Marx described. The world has never known the communist ideal Marx believed would celebrate and enhance human potential.

The groundwork for any revolutionary movement was meant to be a long process which workers organized and won. By contrast, in the Russian and Chinese revolutions, power was seized. Freely associated human beings did not necessarily embrace a radical change in consciousness that rejected consumerism and work as a means to an end. Endemic to Marx’s ideals is a collective enthusiasm to embrace work in the interests of the common good (to work to help one another and one’s self, rather than in the pursuit of profit). A successful economy, for Marx, is prohibitive without this shared commitment. When production and profit remain primary and human beings secondary, a “fetishism of commodities” persists—rather than the compassion that would otherwise take place among freely associated beings.

In capitalism, people must accept inhumane, unequal and intolerable conditions, writes Marx. In earlier periods religion more universally encouraged people to endure their difficult circumstances. People suffered in their day to day lives, looking forward to tranquility in an afterlife as a reward for tolerating and accepting present situations. Therefore institutionalized religion was an opiate of the people for Marx because it persuaded people to feel happy even as they were exploited and alienated from one another, themselves and their human activity.

For Durkheim, religion is an integrating and regulating force that tempers passions so that people can be satisfied with their means. For Marx, religion may keep people from sinking into despair, but it undermines the ability to fulfill potential by making us complacent to unjust, unnecessary and degrading economic and social positions. Religion becomes a deceptive shield preventing us from recognizing and naming our misery and further undermines our motivation to create the social change necessary for promoting the humanity and spiritual connection we are otherwise capable of building for ourselves and others.

For Marx, religion is used by capitalism to keep us docile; and for Durkheim to keep people attached to their present circumstances. Marx indicts religion

for undermining political resistance. He envisions a world not just void of high suicide rates, but one that is life-affirming, positive and an expression of man's highest nature.

Language in capitalism is manipulated to undermine social change for Marx. In communism, Marx believed, language would be used to connect with others and to build a society predicated on common interests. The language of real life connects us to ideas, consciousness and our relationships with one another.

In capitalism, though, one's ability to communicate— to develop ideas, to indulge one's humanity— is thwarted by the material conditions determining production. The use of language is constructed by the ruling class and masks capitalism as Truth, persuading us that self-gain and personal ambition constitute our nature and that competing and conquering one another is common sense. Language becomes instrumental rather than a means for connecting to our humanity; and in the capitalist equation, what becomes common does not necessarily make sense: Our attributes as social animals are lost.

When language is reduced to use-value, we lose its poetic and creative qualities, or symbolic exchange as Jean Baudrillard wrote. Language in capitalism, in short, is used to maximize profit; and sure enough, as capitalism becomes more deregulated, more starkly competitive, statistics regarding social isolation have increased, and conversation around purchasing has expanded. Thus the way to re-enchant the disenchantment plaguing the modern world is to insist on being human in the ever-expanding mechanization of human interactions. We need to exchange feelings, experiences and share moments of joy. Too often, we communicate instead about our favorite commodities and obediently participate in the "buzz" which corporations paid billions of dollars to create among us. We converse less about our feelings and more about our favorite boots or car—conversations shaped for us after testing hundreds of focus group responses. In superstores, fast-food restaurants and telemarketing, salespeople are coached to recite scripts and customers play their role. Two people can no longer meet as human beings in a spontaneous moment at a retail store. The salesperson says: "Do you have everything you need? Can I get you anything else? The customer plays a role too, muttering lines: "Thank you. I'm fine." At the end of a sale, no extraneous communication has transpired. The vibrant human interaction that might otherwise take place when two human beings meet is smoothly replaced— what remains is a profitable transaction used to maximize corporate interests.

Indeed cash register workers are often penalized, docked in pay, if too much time takes place between sale rings, indicating that a social, rather than a bottom line conversation might have transpired.

Finding a way to brand oneself is common now for everything from corporate logos to non-profit messages to personal growth workshops. Artistic and musical expression, intellectual critical thought, medicine and education are for sale. Rather than freely sharing our creative strengths and gifts as contributions to one another and our own well-being, we look for “what’s in it for me.” People are trained to secure the sound bite that will bring them publicity and monetary gain. The gift an individual might otherwise have meant to share becomes another packaged commodity—its life force squashed.

Where language could be a means for people to connect deeply with others, and to express and exchange what it means to be human, it becomes instead a way to promote social and monetary profit. If intimate conversations were more common, social isolation would not be at all-time highs today. Instead we rarely express feelings with one another—and save our laughter, joy, grief and poignant moments for the carefully designed blockbuster films meant to pull our heartstrings. In our everyday life we are shunned for being too emotional. Language discouraging intimacy today is rampant, like the “dumping,” “indulging,” and “spilling” discussed earlier. We are expected to be professional and appropriate at work and school—impassive— so that that we are more efficiently and effectively productive. It is only in fabricated virtual worlds where we are given permission to emote. We pay to experience sadness, anger, fear and thrills—rather than risk ridicule for expressing the full range of human emotions in our daily repressive realities.

Michel Foucault explained that we pathologize and exclude those who are less likely to proficiently produce. People who don’t follow rules are suspended from school and referred to as delinquents, often imprisoned; if too sexual, then they are condemned as promiscuous and labeled perverse; too sick, then confined to hospitals; too emotional, then mad and committed to asylums. Those who are not able to focus exclusively on a given task are routinely diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and given medication in order to more effectively perform. We know that one wrong move and we will be forced to endure painful gossip and contempt in the daily grind, so most of us keep our nose to the ground and try not to appear too human in order to avoid the all too common social penalties.

The competition and social exclusion inherent in capitalism also undermines our health. Instead of creating the best for the community, people shield their secrets, lest competitors copy and improve on creations. McDonalds benefits from the high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease among Americans who feast on their relatively inexpensive fast-food. Multi-billion dollar profits rationalize related death and illness. In our system, products are not made to support human well-being but to capitalize dollars. Companies are bought and sold with little regard for the people who work there; people are fired, retirement funds wiped out and stockholders left penniless as a result of avarice—the inordinate, miserly desire to gain and hoard wealth, endemic to capitalism.

Since workers are just another raw material, another commodity of production, and since they do not benefit from what they create, but work to increase the profits of others, they are estranged from their activity as well as from their product. We become another object of labor. As in sexism where women are seen as products to inspire sexual desire—in work we are objects used to perpetuate others’ material gain. Prejudice then stems from this fundamental relationship in our economic and cultural life where people become objects, void of spiritual and sensuous nature. When people are objectified (by labor), it becomes easier for us to treat one another as objects too—and therefore less humanely. Marx prioritized the “sensuous external world” from which we ideally create bread and clothes. Instead of working for our common interests though, we exploit nature, rape our resources and use the environment to produce others’ profits. We do not enjoy the benefits of what we create for one another, but instead receive a means to an end, a payment for services.

As such we use nature neither with reverence to the earth and its resources nor for our physical sustenance. Whereas in Marx’s communism, work would organically flow from the ground, for one’s own and the common good, in capitalism, work does not belong to us at all—it is merely a means to an end:

He does not affirm himself, but denies himself, does not feel content, but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind... It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.⁶

⁶ *Ibid.* 60.

Marx saw the potential for humans to create in accordance with the “laws of beauty.” Man recreates himself in his work—intellectually, in consciousness and in reality, wrote Marx. In estranged labor, though, people work as a means to an end, not as a gift and contribution to self and others. Instead of a celebration, an expression of our life-force, our work becomes a means to physical existence. Our being becomes a means to an end; and in this, we are alienated not just from self and others, but from what is distinctive and beautiful about being a species-being, a human being. Further, when we produce with little regard for other beings, social isolation increases.

Paradoxically, in Americans’ increasing despair and solitude, there is new evidence that many animals have inter and intra-species friendships—not just to procreate, maximize territory or obtain food but to enjoy each other’s company and serve one another’s social needs. In other related and perhaps telling trends, studies are suggesting that more women say they won’t marry unless their pets approve; and many are adopting dogs in lieu of children—suggesting that in the face of growing human social isolation and declining friendships and community, animals are replacing humans as significant social supports.

Marx suggests further that man’s advantage over animals—our ability to create not just for ourselves and one another, but on behalf of other species—is transformed into a disadvantage. Our body and our nature are taken from us—that which free animals enjoy. We have an estranged relationship with ourselves, others and what we produce—as each of these instead serves profit. It would not help to increase our wages which for Marx remains nothing but “*better payment for the slave* and would not conquer either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity.”⁷ It is the relationship of labor to profit and competition that alienates man from his activity, others and himself. Increasing wages, even a *living wage* as many liberals demand, would not change the nature of labor as the object of multi-faceted alienation. Even in countries where more economic equity exists, small differences in income are still correlated with decreased well-being reports.⁸ A society should bring people together to work on behalf of one another’s needs. Differences in wealth and goods only serve to incite jealousy and greed.

Marx argued that rather than increasing wages or reducing income disparities, it is necessary to restructure the economic system; instead of being paid for

⁷ Ibid. 66.

⁸ Blanchflower & Oswald: 12; 19.

estranged labor, people will be fulfilled by their contribution to the common good. Then, there would be no need to compare and compete with one another. The larger goal would be to serve ourselves and others, rather than to exceed one another. Liberal scholars, though, including Schor, Callahan, Currie and Levine recommend only more social supports or a more regulated/moral capitalist economy. Schor, for instance, reminisces about a simpler time when consumer goals were manageable; and Currie bemoans zero tolerance replacing rehabilitation in the criminal justice system.

Yet if the problem is rooted in alienation from self, others and human activity—and if such alienation and despair are endemic to capitalism, and only increase with deregulation and dismantled services, it must be a transformed economic system, rather than a capitalism with a friendlier face.

According to Marx, the only way to emancipate people from the persistent and growing alienation of man from his activity, self and others is to free people from the concept of private property and from the objectifying of man and labor. Indeed, capitalism accepts inequality as a basic precept: That some have, and others have not is a foundation of the competition that drives us to produce more. Therefore prejudice becomes a necessary component of social relations. It develops from our economic framework, structured around the objectification rather than the emancipation of people. Marx envisions a society where man can fully and freely express his spontaneous activity and vitality.

Durkheim wrote that society is also endangered by the forced division of labor, which has also become more pronounced today. As people feel driven to make money, rather than pursue their passions, those in power, according to Durkheim, end up in vocations to which they are unsuited. People are then more likely to be unhappy and eventually despair due to a lack of fulfilling human interactions and activity. As discussed earlier, some portion of Americans who pursue their careers with the piercing single-mindedness necessitated to make it to the top, are diagnosed “psychopaths”—victorious as a result of decreased compassion and their willingness to step on anyone in the way. Increasingly college students weigh the professions that will help them pay back student loans—abandoning passions that would otherwise fulfill their dreams.

Marx, perhaps, presages the CEO as psychopath phenomenon when he counseled an alternative path in his ideal communist society, where division of labor and blind pursuit of profit would be eliminated:

“Where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.”⁹

In capitalism greed or “avarice,” motivates people to compete and accumulate personal profit—rather than nurture creativity and connection with others. Competition separates and isolates, and drives many towards severe depression and anxiety. Cooperation could instead help people work and create in ways that are bigger, better and more fulfilling—and which could also culminate in fulfilling relationships.

When competition and personal triumph are valued over connection, support, cooperation and collaboration—it becomes hard to see room for the joy and delight from which Marx believed people could otherwise thrive.

Extrapolating on Marx’s analysis provides insights to the mystery regarding high levels of despair in America today. Avoiding the critical thought of Marx may well ensure acquiescence to high suicide rates and increasing despair. It is incumbent upon us then, to explore the possibility that it is our economic system itself which undermines our potential for happiness and free conscious activity.

Jurgen Habermas further argued that revolution was averted by instituting social welfare programs, which serve to take the edge off the otherwise legitimate rage that workers experience when they suffer massive lay-offs and financial meltdowns as those experienced by many recently as a result of our 2008 “Great Recession.” Instead of rebelling as workers did in the Great Sit-down Strikes in 1936 -37, people have become more tolerant and resigned to their conditions.

The “withdrawal of motivation” from participation in social and political life, Habermas also calls a “motivation crisis,” Baudrillard and Weber call it “disenchantment,” Marx refers to estrangement and alienation, and Durkheim documents high suicide rates. Habermas seeks to free our otherwise colonized lifeworld: The alliance between government and corporations to

⁹ Marx 1846: 160.

micromanage our internal life. People identify themselves by the brands they wear and use today—Prada, Louis Vuitton, Michael Jordan, Lexus, Mac, PC, iPhone, Galaxy—and less often think of themselves and others in relationship to their values, politics and social ideals.

It is not possible though, to replace our integrity, the basis of our humanity with allegiances to brands that further a corporation's profit strategies. People do not derive pleasure as human beings by being a member of the "Pepsi Generation" or "The Real Thing" without dire consequences. Habermas suggests that psychopathologies are a necessary outcome to this social disintegration and collective anomie—and surely current despair statistics are some confirmation.

People blame their unhappiness on their weight, partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, public speaking issues, friendships or lack thereof, or insecurities about hair, height or skin color; these are the so-called deficiencies carefully calibrated by billion dollar focus groups to perpetuate "healing" via frenetic purchases. We individualize our pathologies and believe that our problems have nothing to do with the larger economy and the widespread depression, anxiety and social isolation afflicting Americans today. We go to psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, life coaches, body workers and other well-meaning helpers to find out what's wrong with us—and how we can improve ourselves so that we can be happier—and better "adjusted." So many of us never recognize that being "adjusted to injustice" as Cornell West often says, is an even more dire fate.

Indeed the helping professions have become another new opiate of the people. We feel relatively better in the contrived relationships offered to us. Therapy of one form or another takes the edge off our suffering—like religion did in the 19th century; and social programs did in the early 20th century. The 21st century, indeed, is characterized by the pathologized individual striving to become more independent, self-reliant and individualized—unaware that these are precisely the values causing all the misery in the first place. Therapy replaces the authentic friendships and other "co-dependencies" that would otherwise enhance our potential as well as our happiness as human beings.

What would it take to appreciate ourselves and others more? What can we do collectively to decrease the widespread anxiety from which capitalism feeds? To recognize that these despair indicators are not specific to individuals, but stem from a larger social and economic phenomenon founded on alienation and growing from estrangement may in itself be liberating. Such

a realization plants seeds for transformation where fulfilling relationships with self and others is possible—and with that joy, effervescence, vitality and re-enchantment.

Conversely, as capitalism becomes that much more intolerable, and depression, anxiety and social isolation expand, people become more tolerant and adjusted to injustice. So many of us are resigned to the depression and anxiety that is normative today. We live with social isolation and buy more products to soothe our souls; and we distract ourselves from our misery by engaging in fast-paced rides and related Disney entertainment. We sit in offices and wonder: “What is wrong with me?” We take medication to more effectively endure our harsh realities.

These, though, remain distractions. Authentic happiness comes from working together with other people and oneself toward common goals and a common good. Social change takes place by building more authentic relationships—finding ways to connect with others and sharing feelings, experiences, knowledge and other deeper forms of being. In our current, corporate-driven world, where the impetus is to create “buzz” and to subsume our conversations with discourse on products, deep connection is a challenging undertaking.

Our political system can’t solve the problems created by capitalism—in part because we have yet to name capitalism as the problem in the first place. Instead of discussing the problems inherent to capitalism, we distract ourselves with issues related to balancing the budget or raising or reducing taxes. During the McCarthy period, questioning capitalism was illegal; now alternatives are scoffed as foolish idealism—utopian dreams at best, and most often, the likelihood of an even darker doom.

Americans remain disaffected, apathetic and resigned, disenchanting, estranged, depressed, anxious and lonely. Being a smart consumer is a poor substitute for fulfilling identities and relationships. Without acknowledging capitalism as at least part of the misery machine, conversations related to self-help and psychological renewal will continue to disguise the social disease.

Juliet Schor’s *The Overspent American* and *The Overworked American*; Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz’s *The Lonely American*, David Callahan’s *The Cheating Culture*, my own, *The Bully Society*, and the related titles: *The Hurried Child*, *The Over-scheduled Child*—all help to describe our twenty-first century dystopia. In light of these insights, it is worth recalling the cataclysmic

fiction that has come to fruition. In 1984, George Orwell predicted our resignation to the “reality” of absurd contradictions such as: “freedom is slavery;” “ignorance is strength;” and “war is peace.” Similarly, we believe today that inequality is better than equality; that competition is better than cooperation; that individual profit beats concern for the common good; and that a driven pursuit towards success is better than compassion for others. Our present contradictions reveal Orwell’s apocalypse.

In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) his character, Lenina believes taking drugs is the only way to contend with daily life.

“I don’t understand anything,” she said with decision, determined to preserve her incomprehension intact. “Nothing. Least of all,” she continued in another tone “why you don’t take soma when you have these dreadful ideas of yours. You’d forget all about them. And instead of feeling miserable, you’d be jolly. So jolly.”¹⁰

Huxley similarly predicted the medicated American phenomenon—an opiate a la Marx without much disguise. In *Comfortably Numb: How Psychiatry Is Medicating a Nation* (2008) Charles Barber writes that Americans have become obsessed with a quick fix and are abusing antidepressant drugs as never before. The U.S. accounts for two-thirds of the global antidepressant market. In 2006, 227 million antidepressant prescriptions were dispensed in the United States, more than any other class of medication; in that same year, the United States accounted for 66% of the global antidepressant market; 1 out of 10 Americans are on some form of anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication. Barber asks whether Americans are less happy than the rest of the world or whether we are just more dependent on drugs. In either case, today’s ‘medicated American’ indicates that the new opiate of the people is simply—opiates.

More or less social services, higher or lower wages will do little to transform a social structure that survives and flourishes on anxiety, depression and loneliness. People are in pain, searching for a way to be fulfilled, happy and engaged with themselves, others and the larger world. Contemporary opiates like therapy and medication individualize our troubles; fuel misery and prevent us from seeing the deeper problems embedded in the economy. More research is needed regarding the contradictions inherent in capitalism

¹⁰ 91.

and a relationship to despair statistics. Suffice to say, few people are faring well—unless they are outliers who have figured out how to live with more meaning and connection in spite of pernicious social forces.

In Huxley's dystopia, his "Savage" tried desperately to release people from their medicated comas (opiates) so that they could become free people at last, aware of the misanthropic society to which they had become so resigned:

"Don't you want to be free and men? Don't you even understand what manhood and freedom are?" Rage was making him fluent; the words came easily, in a rush. "Don't you?" he repeated, but got no answer to his question. "Very well then," he went on grimly. "I'll teach you; I'll make you be free whether you want to or not." And pushing open a window that looked on to the inner court of the Hospital, he began to throw the little pill-boxes of soma tablets in handfuls out into the area.¹¹

In the culmination of Huxley's novel, soma prevails. The Savage wakes from being forced back into a soma daze and people continue to endure their harsh realities by remaining medicated, ignorant and stupefied. The possibility that change will occur slips out of reach again. Opiates remain the opiate of the people.

Today, in addition to being the most highly medicated society, the United States leads the world in illegal drug use—in spite of having the toughest and most punitive drug laws and the highest alcohol drinking age. Illicit drug use is steadily increasing, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014), now nine percent of the population, up eight percent since 2002; and these numbers do not include legal self-medication such as alcoholism; nor shopping, debting, binge-eating or starving, sex, sexting, online gaming, cluttering and working, which are also compulsive self-medicating addictive behaviors on the rise.

More social and economic support programs are unlikely to create more happiness and social connection for Americans, any more than current efforts to destroy social supports altogether. Capitalism as a social and economic framework must be examined for its relationship—perhaps dependence—on high rates of depression, anxiety and social isolation.

¹¹ 213.

Marx envisioned a transformation of consciousness as a precursor to economic restructuring. Until people recognize our interconnections and embrace an economy that helps humans support one another, we will perpetuate misery. A revolution in thinking could sow seeds for real change—and with it the ecstasy, love and passion that is most basically human and yet increasingly elusive.

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