

# **Work and Debt – some comments**

**by Phillip W. Weiss**

**Under capitalism, work is a form of exploitation. One does not need to be a Marxist to understand that. Someone labors. I call them producers. From that labor a product is produced. Someone else takes that product and sells it. The profit goes not to the person who produced the product but to the person who had nothing to with making the product but who owns the means of production. One can argue that the person who owns the means production does contribute to the production of a product. After all, without the machinery or tools required to make a product, there can be no product. Of course, that argument is fallacious. Anyone with money can buy the tools, but they still require someone with the skills necessary to use them. This leads to the fundamental question: how does someone come to control the means of production? The answer to that is by force. Ownership is laying claim to something and then setting up a system to enforce that claim.**

**To make a profit means to take the value of a product, convert that value into something measurable, hence the emergence of money, and then divide that value between the person who actually made the product and the person who controls the means of production. Who controls the division of value is critical as to who gets what. Under capitalism, the owners get to decide. That is because they control the means of production. This unequal relationship allows the owner to determine the distribution of value, and it is never in the producer's favor,**

hence the genesis of profit, derived at the expense of the producer. Lacking the means to leverage their labor, which they perform but do not control, the producers are compelled to accept this arrangement. The mere hint that the owners are planning to withdraw the means of production is enough to extort compliance of from the work force.

What by nature is intrinsically natural and beautiful – to create and produce – becomes something sordid and twisted. In its extreme form, it becomes a tool to inflict pain. Criminals perform “hard labor,” physical training exercises become a form of punishment (“Give me fifty, soldier”), the concept of work is used to mock (“Arbeit macht frei”). Those forced to work become victims. Their work is meaningless except to those who profit, economically and politically. It is corrupt beyond all measure. Jesus Christ said, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”<sup>1</sup> This passage predated Marx by almost nineteen centuries.

One can argue, of course, that in the capitalistic arrangement everyone benefits. Like every half-truth, or half lie, that argument contains a kernel of truth. A producer can say to him or herself, "I'm making a good living. Why should I complain?" Yet, what they are earning is miniscule compared to what the owners of the means of production are reaping in profits, profits derived from the producers' labor.

This is capitalism. It is amoral. It operates according to a simple rule: maximize profits. Profit itself is neither good nor bad. How it distorts social

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 21: 33-43

relationships is the issue. That has to do with people. Does this mean that the capitalist system requires that workers suffer abuse? No. The owners of the means of production have a vested interest in ensuring that producers are productive. To mistreat them is counterproductive to the goal of maximizing profits. However, in the drive to maximize profits, the owner cannot be too generous. Hence, the clever owner is the one who draws a fine line between what it takes to win the producers' cooperation while at the same time ensuring that profit margins remain high. Automobile producer Henry Ford paid his workers well, which ensured their loyalty. Adolf Hitler paid his associates well too, which likewise ensured their loyalty.

In capitalism, everyone involved is alienated from the process. No one cares about the intrinsic worth of the product itself; only how much profit it can yield. Hence the root of the slogan, "Doing it for the money." This statement evokes morbid thoughts and images. To do something that one detests is mental torture. The psychological consequences can be catastrophic. The pursuit of happiness becomes a mockery. Christ said, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"<sup>2</sup> People earn money for doing something they do not like, and then spend that money on things that put them into debt. Some may argue that buying more goods and services means gaining a higher standard of living and a better quality of life. It means having the ability to buy a bigger house, a more expensive car, more toys to play with, more places to travel, to have fun and enjoy life.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16: 21-27

For some, it is a dream come true. Life could never be better, but for others, the producers, that is, those without capital, they can only hope to emulate that dream, but by doing so, they lose control of their lives. It is a painful tradeoff, but they can't help it. Who wants to deny themselves the pleasures that they see others indulging in? Who wants to feel left out? No one. So, out comes the credit card, used to make purchases, which makes the producer/debtor feel good, until it is time to pay the debt. Then the capitalist formula kicks in and re-asserts its inexorable power. Now stuck with a debt, the producer/debtor must take a job to stave off foreclosure, repossession or bankruptcy, simultaneously producing a product or service from which someone else derives profit, and the system goes on, and on, and on ad infinitum.

In the capitalist system, the level of misery is dependent not on income but debt. The relationship is exponential. Mathematically it takes the form of a parabola.

$$\text{Debt (y)} = \text{Misery (x}^2\text{)}$$

$$1 = 1$$

$$2 = 4$$

$$3 = 9$$

$$4 = 16$$

$$5 = 25$$

It does not take much debt to make someone feel miserable. For the holder of the debt, life is good; for the debtor, life is a grind. No wonder there is so much anger and mental illness. With debt comes insecurity and feelings of worthlessness.

That is not conducive to achieving personal happiness or generating feelings of hope and optimism. Hence, anti-social behavior, including episodes of violence, none of which is surprising in an economy steeped in debt.

A corporation accumulates a huge debt and people get hurt. To stave off its inevitable demise, the corporation will reduce overhead costs, which means cutting wages and eliminating staff, also known as downsizing. Sometimes entire countries downsize. Principles of sovereignty become meaningless. Creditors make demands, using ominous threats to force even the most powerful nations to comply. After World War One an entire system of debt collection was put in place, ostensibly meant to secure war reparations from Germany. However, its actual aim was to render that nation incapable of starting another war. It had the opposite effect. Using the imposition of the debt as a pretext, Germany went on a rampage the likes of which almost brought down the entire world. Yet the debt stayed on the books.<sup>3</sup> The same thing happened to the United States after the American Revolution. The United States won the war, but the debt remained. Even winning a war could not relieve the United States from its debt.<sup>4</sup> Such is the power of debt. It has a life all its own. Even when creditors cannot collect, the memory of the debt remains, to reassert its power when the political climate allows it. Even a debt involving one penny can become a source of contention. So insidious is the malevolent nature of debt.

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Suddath, "Why Did World War I Just End?" *Time*, October 4, 2010 – online

<sup>4</sup> "Economic State of the United States at the End of the Revolutionary War" *History Central* – online