

# The Trans-Finite and The Trash Heap: Sorin Cucerai on Capitalism

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Some months ago, Dr. Ovidiu Hurduzeu introduced me to an article by Mr. Sorin Cucerai, “The Fear of Capitalism and One of Its Sources.” Since the article was on the Mises website, I took it for a defense of capitalism. But what I found most interesting is that Mr. Cucerai's defense was identical to my critique. I wrote a commentary on the article on my website, and Mr. Cucerai was kind enough to send me two further articles, “On the Capitalist Order” and “Repeatable Present: Reflections on the American Crisis.” In both of these articles, I found the same honest look at the capitalist system, which one rarely gets from a capitalist. Here then was the possibility of a dialog that exceeded the normal since we both agree, more or less, on the proper description of the system; it was only the interpretation that was at issue. Normally, such debates do not get much past the definition stage, and the participants end up taking past each other.

Let me start by characterizing Mr. Cucerai's explication of capitalism, a system which he sees as “trans-finite—an order meant to transcend itself” (OCO 1). The fundamental condition of existence in this capitalist order is the absence of ownership of a food source. Denied this natural access to subsistence, people are forced to rely on trade which becomes the foundation of cooperation (OCO 2). This situation, does not come about by accident, for the origins of capitalism are not innocent. It begins with the privatization of common property, which deprives people of the opportunity to live by their own means. Further, taxes force a monetization of the economy, since taxes are now payable only in money and not in service or in-kind. Hence, capitalism comes about by deliberate government policy, and “anarcho-capitalism” is a contradiction in terms (OCO 3).

Capitalism, therefore, creates a gap between ourselves and our natures, and opens up a space for a human-specific freedom, one previously unknown. It is hence a form of civilization (OCO 5). This raises, I think, a critical question: whether such an admittedly unnatural system can be “civilized”? There are two levels at which this question can be approached. The first is whether such a system, or any system that creates such a gap with nature, is actually sustainable at either an economic or an ecological level. Now, this question is being answered, I believe, by the twin crises of the environment and the economy. We will have an answer soon enough. But the more interesting question is whether such a system, sustainable or not, is in any way desirable. The best way to evaluate the desirability of a system is to examine its actual results, and judge whether such results are actually good for people.

In describing the results of capitalism, we could do no better than to take Mr. Cucerai's own description. He points out that that modern capitalism is characterized by the disappearance of durable goods; everything has to be constantly replaced (RP 1). This means that people do not work to acquire, they work merely to subsist. But working to subsist is specific to the poor, and today “this behavior is necessarily generalized through the disappearance of durable goods” (RP 1). Hence, despite its apparent wealth, the working world is a world of actual poverty. The reason this condition is “necessary” is that the mass production techniques have the ability to saturate the markets. Further, the use of special purpose machinery raised capital costs, but the machinery could not easily be switched from one product to another. The “necessary” solution, therefore, was to make the same product over and over again, and require the consumers to keep re-buying them.

This continuous purchase of temporary goods locks the consumer in an continuous present. We can have no history. This condition is known to medicine as Alzheimer's disease, cortical decrepitude.

Hence, although we live in a world where there are only new things, it is actually a decrepit world (RP 2). Since mass production can easily satisfy human needs, the system is dependent on replacing needs with desires. This is the consumerist society (RP 5). I will add to Mr. Cucerai's description that this society requires an enormous amount of continuous, expensive, and unrelenting propaganda. People must be educated, without ceasing, that their happiness consists not in other persons, but in things, and in constantly new things. The true education of ourselves and our children takes place not in the schools and the universities, but on the television and the internet.

Under the impetus of mass production, free competition becomes transformed into a zero-sum game: "if someone wins, everyone else must lose" (RP 5). Competition becomes a game of power, a war, and once the war is won, then it loses its meaning (RP 6). In the age of artisans, competition was a positive sum game, which benefited everybody by encouraging specialization. Since no producer could saturate the market, there was no reason to raise barriers to competition (RP 6). This is no longer true. Firms no longer compete directly, but only indirectly, with one kind of consumer good competing with other kinds of consumer goods and in this sense only does competition survive (RP 7).

To make such a system work, human needs have to be dissolved into an endless sea of human desires. The capitalist man has to become radically withdrawn into the solitude of his own desires. Such a solitary, solipsistic man is fundamentally unhappy (RP 8).

Even free trade dissolves, because trade is a relationship between owners, and since there is no real ownership, there is no real trade (RP 8). Private property is replaced by the right of possession of transitory objects (RP 9). In the corporate world as well, there are no real owners. The anonymous mass of shareholders in a modern corporation has no real function in the operation of the company and they are, I might add, a mere distraction to the managers (RP 9).

Along with the disappearance of real trade and real ownership, there is the disappearance of real freedom. Freedom is the ability to act according to one's own will and not merely according to one's own desires (RP 9). And here I will add to Mr. Cucerai's analysis that modern economics has confused self-interest with mere desire. Clearly, they are not the same. I might desire to seduce my neighbor's wife, but it is never in my self-interest to do so, because self-interest implies that the will has been disciplined by the intellect according to some perception of the good. So-called "enlightened" self-interest will allow for some calculation of marginal utilities. Hence, I must calculate whether the husband is bigger and stronger than I am, and hence likely to give me a beating; or whether he is much weaker than I am, and hence likely only to give her a beating. I then calculate the risk of punishment compared with the rewards of conquest, and make an enlightened decision, as a properly rational *homo oeconomicus*.

So then, we are left with a solipsist, devoid of both freedom and happiness, indifferent to the freedom of others, with no real ownership, no real trade, and completely anomic and lawless. Can this really be the end of an economic system? Can this really be described as a "civilization"? Is it not rather the end of man, the destruction of civilization?

Well, then, what is the way forward? How can we escape this collective Alzheimer's? Let me start by saying that my critique of Mr. Cucerai is totally unfair and uninformative. That is to say, I have read exactly three of the author's essays, and I suspect that he has written much more on these topics, and written things that might mitigate what I am about to say. However, since I am here, perhaps we should proceed on the rather dubious assumption that I know what I am talking about in regards to Mr. Cucerai's thought. And I think it best to regard what I am going to say more in the nature of a series of questions rather than a critique.

Let me suggest that there are two problems. One is in Mr. Cucerai's use of "nature," and the other in his

use of the individual. Concerning the use of nature, Mr. Cucerai is right to be suspicious of a pure nature, and right to want to open a space for the “trans-finite” (to use his term). However, this trans-finite cannot be opposed to nature, for in a war with nature, the big battalions are all on the side of nature. No matter how much power man exerts over the natural world, nature must, in the end, win. This is not a war we should fight. Better to be in Afghanistan than in this war.

That being said, we cannot confine man to the purely natural order. Man, alone among all the objects in the natural world, participates in his own destiny. He selects his ends, and chooses the means to those ends. He uses his intellect and his experience to determine where his overall good resides. He then attempts to conform his habits to that good. For the religious person, this good will be the reunification with our origins in the godhead. But this requires that we conform our conduct to what will enable us to participate in the goodness of God. So here then is what really distinguishes man: while man, like every other object, does not control his origins, yet he does create himself, or at least create his own personality. In a relative sense, man is self-made, an attribute he shares with god. True, he is given certain materials by nature, others by his family, custom, culture, and language. Still, from these raw materials he is able to fashion his own personality; every man therefore is a self-made man. Some, it is true, do very little in this continuous act of self-creation, but all have some ability to do so.

The point of all of this is that man has not merely a nature, but a super-nature. Note that the two are not at war with each other, even though a certain tension exists. Now, it is the proper purpose of our economic systems to aid in the proper development of each man's super-nature. This supernatural task does not reduce to economics, but for material beings it is impossible without a proper economics. What is a proper economics? Allow me to defer that question for a moment, and only say at this time what constitutes an improper economics: it is one that impedes man's true development; one that depends on a collective Alzheimer's, on depriving man of his true freedom, on anomie, on solipsism, on radical solitude and constant unhappiness. No matter how many shiny new objects we have, such an order can only be a profound perversion of true economic order, precisely because it is a profound perversion of true human development.

In what sense then can we speak of a trans-finite civilization? Certainly not in the sense of escaping the finite; this is neither possible nor desirable. We are creatures of the finite order, and it is in that order which all our actions must take place—even our spiritual actions. It is not for nothing that the Orthodox Church lays such a heavy emphasis on liturgy, that realm where the finite and infinite meet. And in this sense, an economic system is also a “liturgy.” In this liturgy, we take finite and natural objects and transform them into created objects more suitable to our proper ends. In this way, we raise the natural world to the level of the supernatural; in this way, we become co-creators with God of order in the world, and in our lives.

Economic systems have another function: we share these co-created objects with our fellow men, so that the material needs of all are met. The particular system of sharing is an exchange system. However, the system is never reducible to mere exchanges (as it is in neoclassical or Austrian theory) because production exceeds exchange, and production can never be explained as a system of exchanges. Production is a creative process, while exchange deals only with changes in ownership of already created things, as when we exchange money for bread. But production calls something new into being and therefore can never be described in terms of exchanges. Hence a proper economy involves a description of both distributive justice, to describe how we distribute the results of human creativity, and exchange or commutative justice, which describes how we exchange things after they are created.

This transformation of the the natural world into a “co-created” world is part and parcel of civilization. In this civilizing process, we “civilize” both the natural world and ourselves. However, this civilization is not possible in a world of consumer goods, in a world of pure desire. Indeed, the whole point of

civilization is to discipline the desires, to turn them into better, something, paradoxically, more desirable. In this process, true wealth is critical. True wealth consists in use-values, not in exchange values. And the more durable an object, the more use-value—that is, the more wealth—it contains. A car that lasts 10 years conveys more wealth than one that lasts five, and one that lasts 20 more than one that lasts 10. And there is no reason why a car should not last for a long time, or a washing machine, or any other good that is not immediately consumed. But capitalism, as Mr. Cucerai points out, hates this kind of wealth; it cannot tolerate it. And in hating this kind of wealth, it hates civilization itself. Therefore, it bends all of its considerable powers to destroying the mind of man by a constant and unremitting program of propaganda, that is advertising, to loosen man from his true nature, and reduce him to a mere object of nature. Unlike the Soviet and the Nazi states, we have in capitalist states no minister of propaganda; yet we have an apparatus of propaganda that the dictators could not imagine in their darkest fantasies of social control.

Therefore, I believe Mr. Cucerai is simply wrong when he insists that man must be separated from the means of his own support in order to civilize him, which means making him dependent on the market. In the first place, this step is redundant, since man is always dependent on the marketplace. What examples there might be of a true Robinson Crusoe, totally autarkic, are too trivial to merit our attention. Rather the opposite is true: to get men to participate more fully in the markets, we must give as many men as possible the tools necessary for creativity, so that they have something of their own—aside from their labor—to exchange. True civilization depends not on restricting ownership, but on extending it.

If the capitalist world of transitory possessions is hostile to civilization, the world of the craftsman is friendly towards it. The craftsman creates, as Mr. Cucerai points out, enduring values, durable goods. And this is more possible than ever. Indeed, the dominance of the industrialist can be overcome—is being overcome—by the widespread dispersion of small-scale machinery. Indeed, many households possess sophisticated machines, and a village or a neighborhood might possess among them as much machinery as does some factories. This allows sophisticated production to be widely distributed. Small capital can now compete with large capitals, a model that has been thoroughly tested in places like Emilia Romagna. Capitalism is not our only choice. In fact, capitalism, which destroys man, is rapidly destroying itself. Its true goal is the production of objects that spend as little time as possible in the hands of consumers as useful items, while on their way to their ultimate destiny in the trash-heap. It is this trash-heap that is the true measure of capitalist “wealth,” and such a system finds its ultimate consummation in placing itself on the trash-heap of history. As Schumpeter understood, “creative destruction” eventually destroys itself.

The second point that I find problematic in Mr. Cucerai's work is his reliance on the individual rather than on the person. Nowhere do I find (and I freely admit that I have read only three works) a mention of the social nature of man. Rather, the social is something that Mr. Cucerai would force on man by denying him access to his own means of subsistence to make him rely on the market, a social institution. But this is simply unnecessary since man is by nature a social being. None of us are autarkic; even with our own means of production we cannot produce each thing we need, but must exchange with others, first by means of gift and then by means of commerce.

Indeed, we are called into being by the ready-made society of the family, and from that little society we receive our first gifts. Material gifts to be sure, but also the gifts of culture and language, our first experience of love, our social norms. All the gifts which we later use to form ourselves have their origin in this little society, and they allow us to move in the much larger societies that form the ground of our being.

Thus, from his very origins, man is not so much an individual as a person, that is, a being-in-

relationship. Hence, man's happiness cannot be in solipsism. Indeed, it is perhaps incorrect to call a solipsistic being "happy" or "unhappy." One can at best describe the state of such a being in terms of pleasure or pain, or more usually the absence of either. But the terms happy and unhappy do not seem to fit. Why? Because our happiness consists in right relationships with others. Man can endure pain and fire, hunger and thirst, but he cannot long endure loneliness.

Now, this longing for the other has a material base, because man is, in part, a material being. And our proper relationships with the other are ordered by a proper economic order. What is this proper economic order? There are of course a congregation of "isms" that attach to economic debate: communism, capitalism, Fascism, distributism, Austrianism, and so forth. But all of these debates really come down to one question: whether we shall regard "the other," each person that we deal with, as an end in him or herself, or whether we shall regard them as a means to an end. The battle was really joined in 1714 with Mandeville's publication of *The Fable of the Bees*, and the subtitle gave the whole thing away, *Private Vices; Publick Benefits*. It is Mandeville, and not Adam Smith, who is the true father of modern economics, and all texts since then are only a commentary on the famous *Fable*.

All economic questions then are whether we should root the system in private vice, that is, the conversion of the other to a mere utility for our own desires, or public virtue, whether we should respect the freedom and development of the other, and regard their development as part and parcel of our own; whether, that is, there is a common good which exceeds mere individual desire.

So here is my question. I have in Mr. Cuceraï one of the most profound critics of capitalism I have ever read. And yet, he seems to be a supporter (if I have read him correctly) of this collective Alzheimer's, this cortical decrepitude. But if a person would not desire such decrepitude for one's parents or oneself, why would he desire it for society as a whole? I am completely perplexed; the conclusion does not match the premises. However, I am sure that Mr. Cuceraï is preparing to enlighten me on just this question, and I thank him in advance.