

The Downside of Capitalism

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As a Medical Sociologist, the author not well-versed in the intricacies of economics, so my explanation of capitalism might seem simplistic. Simply put, when individuals and organizations in a capitalist economy make a profit selling goods or services, they get to keep it. In addition, when people earn money by gambling, investing or trading, they can keep that money, too. While profits are taxed, there is generally no limit to the amount of profit that can accrue.

This system can help some individuals to become fabulously wealthy, while leaving others struggling to pay their bills in a society where having money is viewed as an indication of a person's character, success, and overall worth as a human being. This distorted view of human capital might not be as potentially damaging to some individuals and groups if everyone had an equal shot at the mechanisms through which wealth can be achieved, but not everyone does.

Lest I sound unpatriotic, let me assure readers that I am not. America is a land of great opportunity and the author wouldn't want to live anywhere else, but as a sociologist the author have learned to view societies and cultures from many perspectives.

The American Dream is a widely held notion that promises people success through hard work. It holds that individuals who want to be successful and make lots of money have to go to college to earn at least a four-year degree. Those who continue on to graduate and/or professional schools earn more money and gain more prestige. The American Dream holds that if one is admitted to a 'good' college (there are varying definitions of what that means, but the 'better' colleges usually cost much more) works hard in college, he/she will get a 'good' job. A 'good' job is one with a salary high enough to buy a home, go on vacations, and have considerable disposable income left over after all the bills are paid. A 'good' job is also one with a future, which usually means that such a position comes with eventual promotions and raises. The salary from one's job determines where one will live and what one's lifestyle will be. That lifestyle and the values, behaviors, and interests that go along with it, will be passed on to the next generation, thereby increasing the number of people whose educations and jobs will lead them to a comfortable lifestyle.

Unfortunately, the American Dream doesn't always work the same way for everyone. In general, the funds for public school systems, kindergarten through 12th grade, come from the property taxes in a community. Since public school students have to attend local schools, children in poor communities often receive a sub-par education. People in poor communities often don't own their own homes, so they don't pay property taxes, which means that the school systems can't afford the best teachers, equipment, or services. Parents in such communities often have to work several jobs to make ends meet and don't have the time to make sure their children are doing their homework and behaving appropriately in the classroom. I teach at a university where the majority of the students come from the public education systems of the Southern United States. They do not lack intelligence; they lack academic and critical thinking skills, as well as the motivation required to succeed in college.

In poor communities, most families don't have access to affordable health care. Their jobs are hourly, part-time, or are considered

temporary, which means they rarely have health insurance. If they are sick they have to go to work because if they don't they'll lose money; nor can they afford to stay home with a sick child. A sick child will go to school and because he/she doesn't feel well, will not be able to learn as efficiently. Such a student might be labeled as 'slow,' when in fact, he/she might not be functioning at peak performance because he/she just doesn't feel good.

In contrast, families with money who own their own homes can support a much better public education system in their respective communities. They'll see their children get into 'good' colleges because they can afford it or because their kids do well enough in high school to receive scholarships and other forms of financial assistance. Those students will get 'good' jobs and achieve a comfortable lifestyle.

There is the assumption that those individuals who are poor are just lazy and would rather receive public assistance than actually work for a living. While this is true of some poor people, we often assume that poor people lack the intelligence or the motivation to get ahead, while rich people have the character and the drive to succeed anywhere. We like rich people, regardless of how they got their money.

Since one's job leads to a particular lifestyle, we often define ourselves and others by the work that we do. In response to the question, "Who are you?" most people would give their job titles rather than their position in a family or a community. Children learn early on in life how to respond to the time-honored question, "Johnny, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Little Johnny has learned to give the name of a job that seems exciting or prestigious; such as, "I want to be a fireman," or "I want to be an astronaut." It will be a long time before Little Johnny responds, "I want to grow up to be the best father that I can be," or "I want to be the kind of friend that my friends know they can count on." A job is not just the key to a certain lifestyle; it's also a main source of identity in a capitalist society where money is seen as an indication of a person's character.

To be looked down upon or ridiculed for not having money has consequences for one's self-esteem. Some people feel like failures because they aren't rich while others attempt to portray themselves as rich when they are not. There is often resentment for people who are wealthy, especially for those who are believed to have come by their wealth through inheritance, as the assumption is that they didn't have to work for anything they have. The relative success of a person can be assessed through many aspects of his/her life, but unfortunately we tend to equate success with money.

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Received November 06, 2017; Accepted February 16, 2018; Published February 28, 2018

Citation: Apt C (2018) The Downside of Capitalism. Social Criminol 6: 178. doi: 10.4172/2375-4435.1000178

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