The Poverty of Hatred and the Hatred of Poverty: The Ideology of American Progressivism

written by Bryant William Sculos | July 9, 2015



"Rich people are the fucking worst." This is the premise and title of Sean Illing's recent *Salon.com article* (June 22, 2015). While I agree with his sentiment, the argument that follows this provocative title leaves a lot—too much—to be desired. Illing is a self-professed progressive, and the purpose of his article was to discuss the various "new" ways the rich are expressing disgust for the poor or anyone who isn't rich, in the context of the on-going drought in California. While I completely agree that "rich people are the fucking worst," Illing misses the proper target of critique. Rich people do indeed suck. However, progressivism itself sucks, and here's why: it misses the systemic root problem. The rich suck, because capitalism encourages them to suck.

As bad as that is, capitalism also encourages the poor to hate themselves. It is only through the rejection of capitalism, if not through revolution then through ground-up radical reforms, that both the currently rich and poor can collectively live emancipated lives without this poverty of hatred. We can and should maintain a hatred of poverty, without ever hating the poor. Hate the rich, but hate them productively by viewing them as the product and beneficiaries of an unjust, exploitative system. Though thinkers like Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, the foremost Freudo-Marxists of the twentieth-century, often disagreed with one another, their theories coincide around the idea that capitalism encourages a certain kind of psychological disposition and even specific manifestations of that psychology, which tend to reproduce and normalize capitalist relations of production. We can hate the rich, but blaming individuals for deeply normative beliefs is precisely what the forces of capitalism count on. Go ahead, blame individuals, but the system gets to keep on going.

Illing claims that the top 1% suck and this specific kind of sucking is "new." Rich people suck, but why do they suck and for how long have they sucked? Let's take the second question first. The answer is: nearly forever. Since before feudalism, the elites have sucked. They have talked down to the poor, to put it mildly. They have always attempted to express how their privileged position warrants special desert (and dessert). Even if this "war" on the poor were new (it isn't), this perspective of the wealthy deserving more privilege and are simply better has not been silent recently in any way, as Illing seems to imply. Are we really surprised to hear random rich people like Steve Yuhas and Gay Butler expressing so much disdain for the poor when we hear such nonsense from public figures, elected leaders or even Supreme Court justices on a daily basis? Scott Walker

has reinvigorated the war on labor and teachers of all stripes. Tom Perkins has suggested that the rich are under similar threat that the Jews were under the Nazis, and equally unjustifiably. He also suggested that the richer you are the more votes you should get. Mitt Romney's comment on the 47% of people who mooch of the government fits well in this barrel of class warfare rhetoric aimed at the lower classes. Even a cursory examination of the rhetoric on Fox News exposes the fact that the hatred of the poor across all classes is pervasive and loud.

In the United States, this hatred of the poor—this unjustified, repulsive elitism—is hardly limited to the super-rich or even the conventionally rich. Our middle class despises the poor. The poor despise the poor. This is the function of ideology, and it is a product of the system we live in: (neoliberal) capitalism. My argument is hardly novel though. From Marx to the early Frankfurt School thinkers like Theodor Adorno, to the aforementioned Fromm and Marcuse, there has been no shortage of theorists pointing to this counterrevolutionary, status-quo affirming, justice-defacing mentality perpetuated under capitalism—the longer it persists, the worse this seems to get. Contemporary cultural critics like Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have taken up the mantle of this tradition in various ways.

From this socialist perspective, the problem is not that the rich suck (though they certainly do). The real problem is that, for the most part, we all suck. We all suck, because capitalism sucks (marginally less that feudalism and its predecessor systems). The subjects of capitalism, particularly the subjects of late, neoliberal, market-masturbatory, consumeristic capitalism, are psychologically conditioned by the ideological forces of the system they are raised in and learn to become "respectable adults" within. The belief in the laziness or unworthiness of the poor (even among the poor) is a direct result of the forces of capitalism. The only difference between the rich and the poor in this regard is that the rich benefit ridiculously more from the arrangement, but their hatred of the poor has its origins in the same place as the poor's hatred of themselves and one another—the ideological apparatuses of capitalism. The rich suck. The poor suck. We all suck, because capitalism sucks.

Yes, the rich also have greater institutional capacity to deal with these larger structural, systemic problems, but their psychological conditioning largely prevents them, or seriously inhibits their desire to do anything about it. They are told by other rich people, themselves perpetuating these ideological clichés (which is why Lukács suggested that the bourgeoisie could never attain class consciousness without renunciating their own existence). This is not to let the rich off the hook. Psychological conditioning is hardly absolute, especially with their access to the best schools and university education in the world. This social conditioning is deeply influential though, especially in a society that, regardless of class, exhibits such a minimal capacity for the practices of self-reflection and self-criticism.

Sean Illing is not the source of the problem, and I am a bit unhappy with myself for feeling the need to criticize a person who is at least attempting to point out the massive issues we are facing as human beings rooted in the massive wealth and income inequality in the US and the world. He is actually fairly close to pointing the finger in the right direction. However, my critique is necessary because it speaks to the larger failure of American progressivism, namely its complicity with the system of capitalism. Now, I am not suggesting that because outlets like *Salon.com* or thinkers like Illing live within capitalism they cannot criticize it honestly (though they typically don't). What I am saying is that the progressivism they represent actually supports capitalism. With lines like "Wealth…isn't the enemy. The problem is the attitude of the wealthy…" "To be rich is no crime." "[T]o profit at the expense of others, is quite another thing – and it's all too common these days." These lines represent the true error of progressive liberalism in the United States.

While it is certainly true that there is plenty of industrial capacity to provide more than decent lives

for everyone in this country and probably the world if production capacity and resources were reorganized justly, it is very unlikely that there would be any group of people who could justifiably be rich, under such a reorganized system. The rich are the enemy of the people, but they are also victims of the ideology of capitalism. The poor are subjected to and internalize this ideological narrative regarding the unworthiness of the poor as well—and suffer all the more for it. Capitalism is based on the pursuit of profit at the expense of others. Without this "all too common" practice, there would be no capitalism. Illing and those center-Leftists of his ilk are ignoring the truth that capitalism undermines the progressive goals of justice, equality, and freedom. Progressives, and even many socialists and Marxists, seem to ignore how what remains of the middle class and the poor are taught to hate to the poor as much as the rich clearly do.

I recently saw a friend of a friend's post on Facebook. A young soldier posted a side-by-side picture of his grocery cart alongside the grocery cart of the woman in front of him (for the purposes of anonymity, the names and images have been left out—who he is, is irrelevant. He is simply a representative of what I am speaking about). The other person's cart was full to the brim. A few steaks and slices of fish are visible. His cart has some cherries, a few frozen meals, a loaf of bread, peanut butter, jelly, and not much else. The caption for the picture said "I hate people who don't work and get to eat like kings for free when I work hard every day and these are the only groceries I can afford for me and my family of four… " Apparently, the person in front of him paid for her groceries with an EBT card and then took her groceries to her brand-new Hyundai Genesis. The comments on this picture from his friends ranged from shared hatred to limited sympathy for his tough situation. A couple comments were nearly genocidal in terms of their proposals for what we should do with people who refuse to work but expect to eat "like kings." Ignoring the fact that this solider himself is probably eligible for some sort of government assistance if his situation is truly that bad, his wild assumptions about the person in front of him (who was, for the record, black and the original poster was white) are entirely off-base.

First, he assumes this woman is unemployed because she is using an EBT card. Thousands of people who receive government benefits on EBT cards are in fact employed (usually in jobs that do not provide a living wage for a single person, never mind a family). Second, he was buying his groceries for about a week: how do we know this person was not buying her family's groceries for a month? How do we even know that the EBT card used contained welfare or SNAP benefits (food stamps)? Child support can be given on EBT cards when done through the court, in additional to other categories of government benefits. Regardless, this young soldier is poor. We should feel sympathy for him and his family, but he is publicly expressing hatred for someone he probably should be feeling solidarity with. He is justifiably angry for the injustice that he is experiencing, but the woman in front of him (even if all of his assumptions were correct—doubtfully though, because only 10% of people who receive government benefits are estimated to be "gaming" the system. Even if that number were double or triple, that would leave 70-80% of recipients rightfully needing and deserving those benefits.). Yet to this young man, the woman in front of him is an object of hatred.

Due to the mystification of the actual relations of production and consumption within capitalism, this young soldier has no other choice, it seems, but to hate the poor. He eventually even posts, in response to all the other comments, that he feels terrible about himself for not being able to better support his family. His story is hardly unique, nor is his reaction. When the poor are repeated told by the "leaders" of this country to put themselves up by their boot straps, how could they be expected to take the time to see through this flaccid rhetoric? Working two to three jobs (if people are able get even one) to support a family doesn't leave a whole lot of time for *ideologiekritik* and neither does shopping all day for the best new Jimmy Choo shoes and Louis Vuitton purses on Rodeo Drive—both to the benefit of the status quo. The only similarity between these two counterrevolutionary lifestyles is that the prevailing ideological narratives go unquestioned in both. It is an important

similarity though.

Does it do any good to hate the rich, when the poor are also guilty of hating the poor? Probably not, but it does feel like the right thing to do. It is. We all really should hate the rich. Illing is quite right to say that “the rich are the fucking worst.” Capitalism is the root of that problem though. Our system of wealth is inherently based on the pursuit of profits at the expense of the working and non-working classes. Capitalism requires at least some degree of inequality and in practice has produced extremely high degrees of it. Hating the rich though, only does so much if that hatred is not coupled with an even greater hatred of capitalism. Those of us on the Left need to be wary of the kind of progressivism that fails to locate the true enemy of progress and justice. Sure, hate the rich, but don’t forget to hate capitalism more. Absent this hatred of capitalism, the rich—and everyone else—will continue to hate the poor while failing to sow the seeds of a kind of society that can develop a hatred of poverty absent a hatred of the poor.

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