

A Capitalist Morality: How Capitalism is Influencing our Ethics (for the Worse)

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Abstract

This article critically examines the relationship between capitalism and morality, asserting that capitalism is inherently immoral due to its reliance on exploitation and systemic harm. Utilising social harm theory and drawing on various academics, the paper argues that the elite mould morality to serve their interests, namely upholding class domination, by presenting inequality and poverty as products of individual moral failure as opposed to systemic exploitation. The paper further critiques the mechanisms which perpetuate these moral frameworks, focusing on the role of the law and the media in obscuring the mass harm caused by the bourgeoisie. The article ultimately contends that under capitalism, morality is strategically manipulated to maintain the status quo, stifle collective justice, and encourage individualism, resulting in widespread social harm.

Keywords: capitalism, morality, class, bourgeoisie, social stratification, social harm theory, law, criminology, Marx

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Introduction

As Frankena (2020, pp.146-173) makes clear, the question of “what is morality?” is a surprisingly complex one, which theorists have been debating for centuries. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2008), morality refers to “a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behaviour and character”. To some, such as Winch (2015), morality as a phenomenon is subjective - dependent on cultural, social, and historical contexts; the reduction of morality to simple social constructionism is not the approach that will be taken in this paper however, since, as Halewood (2023) argues, it prevents “morality” from being utilised as a tool of criticism. Though it is difficult to argue that there is an objective morality, it is possible to utilise the works of social harm theorists - like Hillyard and Tombs (2007) - to redefine morality in terms of harm. In this essay, I will argue that actions that result in harm should be deemed immoral, rather than relying on

capitalism notions of morality/immorality - since capitalism frames the morality of actions depending on the extent to which they serve the interests of the elite.

Capitalism as an immoral system

To begin, we must understand capitalism - the economic *and social* system - as a fundamentally immoral system due to its reliance on exploitation and poverty (Marx, 2018, pp.163 – 164, pp.449-452). Contrary to claims that social class is now an obsolete concept (Nisbet, 1959), evidence suggests that the class divide is actually growing (Office for National Statistics, 2023), with the top 1% of households in Britain having over 200 times more wealth than those in the bottom 10% (Romei, 2022). And this isn't only true for Britain, the World Inequality Database (2022) found that globally, the richest 10% hoard over 75% of all wealth, pushing over 700 million people into extreme poverty (The World Bank, 2023). Inequality and poverty are not by-products of capitalism, they are integral parts of the system, since, as Marx argued, the bourgeoisie can only amass wealth by underpaying workers and reaping the surplus value (Wolff, 2003; Marx, 2018). Capitalism unfairly withholds from people the fruits of their own labour, "entrap[ing] them in servitude to a system that cheats them of what they are due" (Jaeggi, 2016, p.3). Vitaly, exploitation and poverty *are the foundation of capitalism*. By taking a social harm approach, we can decipher the immorality of this by the real physical (Pemberton et al, 2017) and economic harm (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007) caused. Though social harm theory originates from criminology (Hillyard and Tombs, 2017) and is most often confined to this field, the concept of "harm" is an extremely useful one when considering morality and can be applied here. As Pemberton (2015, p.12) explains, social harms refer to actions or inactions that "constitute the fabric of our societies which serve to compromise the fulfilment of human needs and in doing so result in identifiable harms". Social harms are preventable, caused by human actions (Yar, 2012); in this case, the unfair structuring of society is an active choice by the elite. This aligns with Dewey's framing of morality, as outlined by Halewood (2023), which argues that actions are only moral/ immoral if there are "alternative possibilities" in which one has the ability to act "better" but chooses not to - in the case of capitalism, the exploitative nature of society is intentional and preventable, rendering it immoral. The concept of harm itself is a "moral and philosophical" one (Pemberton, 2015, p.150) which allows us to hold institutions responsible for their unjust actions. Vitaly, we can hold capitalism responsible for its reliance on exploitation. As Pemberton (2015, p.35) makes clear, "the organising features of capitalism are inherently harmful" and therefore, inherently immoral.

The moulding of moral judgements by the elite

Despite its own injustice and immorality, capitalism (or the bourgeoisie) forms moral judgements; these work to sustain class domination. As Corrigan and Sayer (1985) argue, the state is a primary agency of moral regulation; for example, the idea that the poor are "lazy" (Halewood, 2023), irresponsible (Clawson and Trice, 2000) and criminal (Hoffman, 1981) whilst the elite are

intelligent and hard-working (Bamfield and Horton, 2009) is perpetuated by the state to “invoke a moral disapproval that reinforces and perpetuates divisions within and between social classes” (Halewood, 2023, p.1). The past British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, publicly asserted that poverty is a “fundamental character-personality defect” as people “don't know how to budget [and] don't know how to spend their earnings” (Margaret Thatcher, 1978, cited in Hightower, 2017, p.1). By situating opinions like these “in the broader context of the social construction of knowledge” (Curato, 2013), we come to understand how dominant bourgeois ideologies like these are intentionally created and reinforced to maintain and reproduce the social order. Through socialisation, we have learnt the myth that people fall to poverty because of their own actions, rendering them as undeserving (Dorling, 2015) - this is central to a hegemony process (Patnaik, 1988) (i.e. it is key to reproducing class relations through consent as opposed to force). Capitalism relies on people believing that poverty is due to a “lack of effort” and “loose morals” (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Van Der Bom *et al*, 2018) as believing this justifies poverty and the social class system.

Internalising capitalist ideologies

These ideologies are not just external, they become “an integral part of [our] knowledge processes” (Patnaik, 1988) and, therefore, a part of our core morals. For this reason, I propose that they should be regarded in the same way as Gramsci’s notion of “common sense beliefs” (Gramsci, 1971, pp.322, 419-420). Though it could be argued that morals cannot be considered beliefs, I contend that, since the idea that something is “good” or “bad” is in itself a belief. The idea that stealing is wrong, for example, is both a moral value and a common-sense belief - therefore, I believe that these phrases can sometimes be used interchangeably. The example of stealing can also be extended if we question where this moral/common sense belief comes from. As we have already discovered, “morals and morality do not spring from within the human individual but from the individual’s relation to the environment” (Halewood, 2023, p.4). - they are “supplied from the outdoor world” (Dewey, 2002, p.16). In other words, our morals/beliefs are not born in a vacuum but are intentionally supplied and shaped by the ruling class. The idea that stealing is wrong is built on the assumption that private property is an individual’s right, an enforced capitalist belief through ideology and legal framework. The point is not to argue that stealing is actually “good” or “right”, it is to point out that our beliefs and morals, often enforced by law, are intrinsically linked with capitalism. This takes us to my next point: the role of the law.

The role of the law

Law abiding behaviour is often treated as synonymous with moral behaviour (Simmonds, 2005). But who defines the law? As Chambliss (1975) argues, laws are not “collectively produced moral boundaries” (Durkheim, 2012), instead, these moral boundaries are created by the ruling class to maintain their position of power and control. This may explain why there are so few laws which challenge the interests of the elites; most laws pertain to the protection of private property

(Chambliss, 1975), with very few laws substantially challenging financial inequality or regulating businesses (Snider, 1993). Furthermore, if we reapply a social harm approach here, we find that the harm caused by governments and corporations (often not labelled as “crimes”) is far greater than any harm caused by individual criminal actions (Canning and Tombs, 2021, Reiman and Leighton, 2016). Despite this, the opposite impression is given by the media, which appears to have an “obsession with street crime... focus is usually drunken violent working-class men and women” (Skeggs, 2005, p.967). Overwhelmingly, crime is treated as a working-class phenomenon, despite the most harm being caused by the bourgeoisie (Reiman and Leighton, 2016). For example, if we look at environmental harm, we see that just 100 companies are responsible for over 70% of deadly greenhouse gas emissions (Riley, 2018), despite individual consumption often being blamed for global warming. Corporations very rarely face criminal charges or any other repercussions for their detrimental impact on the planet - for example, Shell (the second largest oil company globally) have consciously polluted water supplies (Laville, 2023) and have been complicit in the torture and murder of climate protesters (Amnesty International UK, 2020) but have faced no repercussions or moral scrutiny from the government. In contrast, Just Stop Oil protestors faced criminal charges for throwing a tin of soup on a Van Gogh painting (Gayle, 2022) and received significant moral disapproval, with The Daily Mail referring to the activists’ actions as a “relentless campaign of chaos” (Cotterill and Lockhart, 2022). It is important to note that The Daily Mail is owned by Jonathan Harmsworth, a billionaire (Forbes, 2016) with vested interests to villainise activists since implementing environmental policies limits a company’s profitability (Di Ronco, Allen-Robertson, and South 2019). The state responded to the Just Stop Oil protest with moral disapproval and an increase in police powers (Gayle, 2022). It is difficult to deny the moral hypocrisy and double standards of capitalist governments, with the selective enforcement of laws.

Capitalist ideals

So far, it has been made clear that the capitalist system is not only deeply immoral, causing mass harm, but also that capitalism obscures its own immorality through law enforcement and through the framing of the proletariat as criminal/immoral. Now, we will look at the values encouraged by capitalism - namely competitiveness, individualism, and apathy, through devaluing human life (or creating “social death”) and through the alienating nature of capitalism. As Marx expressed, capitalism is a system in “which man [is] a demeaned, subjugated, abandoned, disdained being” (Marx, 1970, p.60).

Capitalism breeds individualism (Greenpeace International, 2024), encouraging people to prioritise their self-interest over collective interests. Economic incentives are often at the centre of this self-interest; individuals are urged to aspire to wealth, even if this is at the expense of others (Thier, 2020, Marx, 1970). Undoubtedly, this leads to egoism and apathy. But how does this affect morality? By prioritising one’s wellbeing above the wellbeing of others, it is far easier to turn a blind eye to the injustices others face. This may explain the historical prioritisation of “comfort over justice” and “profit over people” in the West (McHarris, 2020, Bakan, 2012). As I

write this, there is an ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank; over 45,000 Palestinians have been murdered in Gaza since October 2023 (AJLabs, 2025) - and yet, many in the West are ignoring the crisis, potentially because fighting for justice has no economic benefit to an individual. On the other hand, showing support for Palestinians could actually affect one's livelihood and economic status - since it goes against the economic interests and morality of the state (see: Gendzier, 2015). When the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has voiced support for Israel "not just today, not just tomorrow, but always," (Helm, 2023), voicing support for Palestine can result in punishment, such as being fired from a job (Oladipo, 2023). This suggests that even if one breaks from this individualistic mould, prioritizing justice over their own self-interest, "one's socio-economic status can make it difficult for them to live what their philosophical thinking suggests is a fully moral life" (Williams, 2008) since one can face economic repercussions. Evidently, there is no real choice in one's personal and private morals, even these are controlled by the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, under capitalism, morality is typically characterised by the interests of the elite, deliberately obscuring the mass harm caused by the bourgeoisie. Capitalism is inherently structurally exploitative, creating moral judgements which sustain the social class hierarchy. These moral judgements become "common sense" among the public through socialisation and legal frameworks (which favour private ownership.) As a consequence, people in society are systemically coerced to act in an individualistic manner, thus tending to ignore and disregard collective injustices such as environmental issues and genocides.

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