

Elizabeth Prete

October 19th, 2017

Wealth-Seekers and Leadership

Our current political economy is paradoxically plagued by both abundance and scarcity. The more we that we produce, the more that we have, and the more of nature that we appropriate for our own consumptive practices, the less we believe to have. Much of our lives today revolve around a seemingly innate drive to accumulate progressively more things, whether they be petty wants or genuine needs. In turn, a primary source of momentum for political activity in many wealthy, Western democracies seems to be driven by the same impulsive accumulation and consumption of things. Once our lawmakers and representatives identify a particular societal or political issue, oftentimes they instinctually diagnose said issue as a lack of a particular thing, namely money. No matter the issue, it is the nature of many governments today to pump more money into a system with an already continuous flow of capital. In the face of what massive amounts of wealth exist in the world today among governments, such wealth never seems to inoculate societal dilemmas. The world seems to us to have a never-ending abundance of issues to solve, and a strikingly scarce amount of solutions to them. Could it be that what we consider “appropriate” solutions to the problems we face are, in fact, exacerbating them? Early political theorists and sources of religious authority considered wealth-seekers the least fit among them to rule and govern society for precisely the reasons we find ourselves in such a paradoxical situation today. That is: wealth-seekers exhibit a weakness of character when presented with opportunities for mass accumulation of wealth or power; furthermore, they are less inclined to use their money or power in genuinely virtuous ways.

The problem of scarcity in a world of mass production, accumulation, and abundance is uniquely characteristic of the status quo in part due to how we conceptualize and pursue an “affluent” lifestyle. In his piece “Stone Age Economics”, Marshall Sahlins challenges dominant anthropological narratives of hunter-gatherer societies. In doing so, he illustrates significant differences between these so-called “primitive” societies and those which rode the tide of the Neolithic revolution. Conventional wisdom imagines Paleolithic social and economic life as impoverished, deprived, and impossibly difficult. Yet, while their standard of living might look comparatively low to us, members of hunter-gatherer societies certainly did not think of their livelihoods in such a negative light. In fact, they viewed themselves as being “affluent”, where everyone’s needs are easily met by desiring little (Sahlins 2). Human needs are few and finite: food, shelter, water, and community. These societies desired little else in addition to what sufficiently fulfilled the immediate needs of their community. Conversely, U.S. society today attempts to achieve the goal of “affluence” by producing much and accumulating in excess for the sake of personal consumption.

Just as the Paleolithic hunter-gatherers enjoyed a life of self-sufficiency and independence, so did folks living in the early stages of capitalism. Fernand Braudel, in the piece “Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism,” chronicles the beginning of “modern” material life, especially from 1400-1800. In these societies, folks regularly convened in young, local markets on a daily basis. These markets were public, transparent, and facilitated the flow of information from person to person. In sum, early market economies constituted a socially significant site of interaction contrary to the popular misconception that these folks lived a socially isolated existence. However, these early stages of capitalism also bore “countermarkets”, which avoided public flows of information. Countermarkets were usually global trade routes

comprised of luxury goods and were esoteric in nature. Due to the nature of luxury goods, not many people were directly involved in these markets, hindering market competition. It was with the advent of countermarkets that traders broke the link between producer and consumer. Only traders themselves were aware of the markets' conditions. Producers and consumers did not frequently interact in countermarkets. Rather, traders acted as a middle-man, a role which allowed them to initiate transactions based on arbitrary financial arrangements without knowledge of the public. Ultimately, these countermarkets mark the origins of excess accumulation of capital and wealth. The esoteric nature of these markets coupled with lack of public oversight meant that traders could set prices as they wished.

As evidenced by the transformation of societies from hunter-gatherers to larger-scale collective life, certain structural conditions give way to law-abiding behavior while others create the necessary conditions for vice. Aristotle echoes this point in "Nicomachean Ethics": since humans are not born with an understanding of virtue from vice, law-abiding behavior must be taught and learned. Being a person of virtuous character is the natural, or teleological end for humans (Aristotle). For Aristotle, the journey to becoming a virtuous individual is one that requires that individuals either benefit from good starting points or be encouraged to cultivate their character through virtuous activity. Living a virtuous life requires making morally and ethically sound choices for the sake of those values themselves. Ultimately, people must derive genuine pleasure from behaving virtuously, as virtue is an end in and of itself (Aristotle 32). Living your life according to virtue is to live a complete life in which you desire little else but the happiness that results from virtuous behavior. Intention and motivation are of the utmost importance for determining virtuous behavior. If individuals do not learn to be virtuous for the

sake of virtue itself, when political or economic conditions change, they will behave in unvirtuous ways to achieve their own interests.

Moreover, Aristotle argues in “Politics” that institutions which organize political, social, and economic life must also encourage and cultivate virtuous behavior in its citizens; in this sense, there is a recursive relationship between character and conditions. Wealth-seekers cannot be trusted to maintain virtuous and just political institutions because they are more likely to succumb to the temptations of mass accumulation and power-grabbing. With the advent of countermarkets under capitalism, social life became to be organized in such a way that impeded the necessary process of cultivation. Capitalism fundamentally encourages the exploitation of natural resources and of other people (Braudel 112). Similarly, economic power develops into a tool of exploitation as national economies grow larger and larger. Enforcing the law and ensuring law-abiding behavior also becomes less feasible as society grows in scale and economic markets become farther removed from the public sphere. If wealth-seeking leaders do not believe that cultivating virtuous and just behavior in these markets is a worthy goal, ensuring law-abiding behavior becomes even more difficult for society.

In juxtaposition to virtuous leaders, wealth-seekers are not concerned with cultivating their own virtuous nature, but instead prioritize accumulating material resources. In his piece, “Money versus Goods”, Wendell Berry contends that capitalist financial systems are intrinsically destructive because they rely on an unsustainable relationship to nature. Berry distinguishes financial systems from economies in the following way: in order for an economy to survive in the long-term, individuals operating within it must abide by the “law of return”, while financial systems sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term material advantages. Berry defines the “law of return” as the natural responsibility of humans to put back into nature what they consume

from it, so as to preserve its natural resources (3). Wealth-seekers cannot be trusted to successfully govern economic systems, because they will not abide by the law of return. Further, wealth-seekers are bad leaders because they settle for less-than-adequate choices for society writ large. They view our natural resources, including land, to be potential sources of profits. Viewing nature as solely a commodity to be sold in markets, they believe that we can affix a price to everything; thus, everything is a potential source of profit. For them, the pursuit of wealth justifies overconsumption. Ideally, political leaders ought to orient their political rule towards the common good.

Wealth-seeking behavior ultimately erodes the moral integrity of a political society, so that society no longer is concerned with the common good of the whole nor what is in the interest of their neighbors. In particular, charging interest in exchange for a loan constitutes unjust behavior contrary to the common good and is not generous, neighborly behavior. Hebrew scripture explains: “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.” (Perkins). Additionally, St. Thomas Aquinas views usury as an unjust act for similar reasons: “To take usury for money lent is unjust in itself, because this is to sell what does not exist and this evidently leads to inequality which is contrary to justice” (Aquinas). Exacting is a wealth-seeking behavior because it indicates that one is not performing a generous act for the sake of being virtuous towards your peers, but rather for one’s own personal gain. Not only is it fraudulent in that you are selling something which does not exist, but it makes the economic transaction unequal, which is also unjust.

Both Hebrew and Christian scripture warn of the perils which society faces if wealth-seeking behavior is allowed to go on unchecked: “Those who guard their mouths preserve their

lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin. The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied” (Perkins). In other words, gluttony and other forms of greed are destructive to the individual. Wealth-seeking behavior naturally leads to overconsumption and greed. Such consequences can be logically extended to apply to whole societies which sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term advantage.

Morally speaking, wealth-seekers are less likely to pursue virtuous activity purely to further the common good of their subjects. They are either motivated by self-interest, greed, or power-grabbing. For these reasons, a society run by wealth-seekers will not realize the common interest of its citizens, for they will not realize it among themselves, either. Leaders of political societies ought to steer their subjects in the right direction and lead by example. Thus, if wealth-seeking leaders exhibit wasteful and greedy behavior, their citizens will act in similar ways, as wealth-seeking behavior distorts our relationships with our fellow human beings.

Works Cited

Aristotle, and W.D. Ross. "Bk. 1 & 3." *The Nichomachean Ethics*. N.p.: Oxford UP, 1959. N. pag. Print.

Aristotle, Ernest Baker, and R.F. Stalley. "Bk 1: 1-13." *The Politics*. N.p.: Oxford UP, 2009. N. pag. Print.

Berry, Wendell. "Money Versus Goods." *What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth*. N.p.: Counterpoint, 2010. N. pag. Print.

Braudel, Fernand. "Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism." Translated by Patricia M. Ranum. N.p: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. N. pag. Print.

Coogan, Michael, Mark Brettler, Carol Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. N.p.: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.

Sahlins, Marshall. "The Original Affluent Society." *Stone Age Economics*. N.p.: Routledge Classics, 2017. N. pag. Print.