

REVIEW ESSAY

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Capitalism as a Cultural System: In Memory of Joyce Appleby

Abstract: This essay discusses Joyce Appleby's idea that capitalism, apart from being an economic system, also is a cultural one. Her earlier work, which included the intellectual history of capitalism, stressed the the impact of early American thought on the emerging national identity of the United States, particularly in the context of free enterprise, individualism and the marketplace. After a brief discussion of Appleby's early ideas, the article goes on to assess the concept of capitalism as a cultural system, tracing its potential usefulness in the study both of American culture and of the discourses pertaining to this economic system and the culture it is associated with.

Keywords: Joyce Appleby, capitalism, consumerism, individualism, American identity

There are several problems that make the study of capitalism difficult, regardless of the field from which one approaches the topic. First of all, the issue is often glaringly politicized. In many cases, it is not difficult to guess the author's political preferences when reading such a book or article. Some authors are conscious of this, and inform the reader of their political or ideological stance at the very beginning of their works, which helps one take into account their possible bias. Moving away from politics, the second issue concerns other ideological factors, owing to which publications often are overviews of their authors' beliefs about the moral qualities of the marketplace, or lack thereof, rather than scholarly analyses. This includes opinions pertaining to the drawbacks of capitalism, such as its focus on material goods, and the belief that it fosters political apathy, as well as more celebratory voices, which see it as the ultimate tool for achieving personal satisfaction. Finally, and most significantly in this context, a major portion of the writing on capitalism portrays it as a rigid and unchanging construct. This projects a false image in which a larger part of the globe is rendered homogenous through the workings of this economic system, without acknowledging its many regional variants, which include revised approaches to such issues as universal healthcare or market regulation. These problems are acknowledged, yet there is no agreement on what causes them.

Joyce Appleby, who passed away at the age of 87 on December 23rd, 2016, offered an interesting perspective: capitalism is not only an economic system; it also is a cultural one. The thesis, made in her penultimate book, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism*, may, at first, seem trite and not at all innovative. After all, there have been studies of “the culture of capitalism” in the past. Nonetheless, the seemingly minor change from “the culture of capitalism” to “capitalism as a cultural system” carries the implication that culture under this economic system is not a reaction to it, or mindless conformity enforced by it, but its inherent, negotiated part. This idea is often missing from many analyses of the subject, which tend to consider culture and capitalism as opposing forces, or, like Marxism, tend to view consumer culture under capitalism as banal, exploitive, and disempowering the people.¹ This article will look at Appleby’s work on capitalism, particularly its significance for American national identity. It will also and show how her approach can prove beneficial for the understanding of the cultural dynamics between production and consumption. Finally, I will also try to shed light on how her approach can provide insight pertaining to the various academic discourses on the subject.

Since her first book, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England*, Appleby focused on the various historical and intellectual currents that informed capitalism in its early formative stages, along with the intergenerational variance in how people approached this topic. Many scholars found the work reinvigorating, as it offered new perspectives on early capitalism, and looked at the issue from a different standpoint than previous studies did. Although it took into consideration the philosophical undercurrents of liberalism, found in the work of such thinkers as John Locke, it also considered more practical aspects on the basis of the work of such authors as Edward Misselden and Thomas Mun.

Her following book, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* looked further into the topic, this time specifically at the case of the U.S. Appleby’s discussion of the cultural currents that led to the demise of Federalism and the rise of a Jeffersonian Republican framework draws on the then-recent redefinition of the concept of liberty and personal freedom, which was understood as the right to participate in the political life of a community (15-17). Yet, it had other meanings, too: it was also understood as the historic rights of an individual or a group of individuals to certain titles or assets, a notion that American colonists strongly opposed (17-19). She also took into account the intellectual history of the concept as developed by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (19-23).²

1 There are exceptions to this, most notably in the field of anthropology. It also should be noted that Marxism, despite its suspicions pertaining to the cultural aspect of capitalism, allowed many to approach the issue of popular culture with a better understanding, the classic example being Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

2 This also highlights another of Appleby’s interest, namely the role of history, and the development of this field. She wrote two books on the topic, *A Relentless Past: History and the American Public* and *Telling the Truth about History*, a collaboration with Lynn

Appleby shows the complex influences that characterized the colonists' point of view in light of their reaction to such events as the Quartering Act or such ideas as the aforementioned thinkers' revolutionary belief that the sovereign's authority was not sacrosanct. She sees such situations as the grounds which led thinkers and statesmen like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson to further develop the way that liberalism was understood, which had a formative role in the way Americans would understand free enterprise.

Appleby continued her examination of the interplay of philosophy, politics, and culture in the context of the early U.S. in her later work.³ *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* was written in a similar vein, investigating the influence of socio-political theory of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had on the developing ideology of colonists-cum-citizens. The book notices the perseverance of the struggle "between the heirs and the disinherited", that takes root in the American revolutionary tradition. Americans are conscious of this, and the U.S. Constitution, along with the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence are common referents for both sides in such conflicts (222-224). Although this clearly suggests the importance of these texts and the ideological traditions they represent in American culture, it also points to the problem of their understanding in the context of changing cultural circumstances. It is noteworthy how often the issue of interpreting these documents remains a focal point in the arguments "between the heirs and the disinherited."

This heritage of American ideals is further explored in *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, in which Appleby focused on the first native-born citizens of the United States. The book undertakes the somewhat neglected issue of how a generation lacking the colonial or revolutionary experience reacted to a new order and new ways of thinking that were the results of that experience. Appleby writes about their precarious position, but also notes that they were conscious of their role as a transitory generation more frequently than one would expect (240). She maps the ways in which the ideals of the revolution congealed onto a complex identity, which rejected the Federalist party on the one hand, but negotiated Jefferson's Republicanism on the other (52-55, 57). The role that ideas of freedom, individuality, and private enterprise, played in the formation of a new culture is emphasized, although such narratives often contrasted with the stark reality. Although some of the risks proved beneficial, many first-generation Americans struggled with bankruptcy, defaulted on their credit, and were affected

Hunt and Margaret Jacob. The former book discussed the impact the development of history had on national identity, particularly in light of the changes in the second half of the twentieth century. The latter was an analysis of history as an intellectual field from times of the Enlightenment to the end of the twentieth century, in which she scrutinizes the impact, benefits and drawbacks of the various paradigms, mostly through the focal point of newer approaches, including poststructuralism and postmodernism.

3 Appleby also was interested in the life of Thomas Jefferson. She wrote a short book on him, and co-edited a volume of his political writings.

by various economic crises. Other contradictions beckon at the topics Appleby previously discussed in *Liberalism and Republicanism*, such as an ostensible devotion to the ideals of freedom that some Americans had no problems reconciling with chattel slavery. It also shows how deeply enterprise and freedom became encultured into the backbone of American culture.

Taking into consideration the criticism of capitalism as an eroding force, the idea that it is a cultural system may raise eyebrows. Many believe it perpetuates greed, exploitation, and vanity. Furthermore, it often is accused of leading to a deterioration of traditional values, while its promotion of individualism and the privatization of life have been accused of, among other things, effectively dissolving the communities. It is noteworthy that, despite political overtones, such criticism appears on both sides of the political spectrum. This is even visible in the field of economics, where some scholars see capitalism as opposed to an authentic and organic culture. One need only think of Juliet B. Schor's work, particularly her books *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*, in which she shows American capitalism as a systemic trap which led to the development of work-spend cycles, which pressure people to work more in order to spend more, but also to an increase of private debt. Such criticism is not a new phenomenon, and can easily bring to mind older traditions, for example the work of Thorstein Veblen. However, even earlier iterations are not difficult to find. How can such a phenomenon be deemed a culture?

Out of all people, it was Theodore Adorno—by no means a friend of capitalism—who criticized Veblen's attacks on conspicuous consumption as not understanding the importance of culture. Although Adorno himself often remains attacked for his perceived elitism and a dismissal of the popular, he agrees with Veblen that “[c]ulture... today has assumed the character of advertising,” but rails against the American economist's idea that it always was such a phenomenon (79). Adorno's own criticism, however, reflects the tendency of dismissing newer developments in culture as the results of the detrimental effects of commodification. Gary Cross, drawing upon G. Stedman Jones, sums this up succinctly: “the ‘authentic’ popular culture of one period is the commercialism of an earlier era” (4). This partially is the result of an underappreciation of how goods are used, and how their use may influence producers.⁴ Although often neglected, the uses of goods

4 Cultural studies are a notable exception, particularly in relation to their focus on the strain between the way consumer goods can be seen as culturally empowering on the one hand, but also reinforcing the hegemonic status quo on the other (see, e.g., Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, John Clarke's “Dupes and Guerillas: The Dialectics of Consumption” or John Fiske's “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance”). Mark Gottdiener's essay “Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Socio-semiotic Approach” offers an interesting elaboration on this topic from a somewhat different perspective. Additional insight, his time from an anthropological point of view, can be found in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. However, only two texts, and only partially, focus on a modern capitalism.

and their cultural life are crucial to understanding capitalism, regardless how one qualifies this economic system. It is through the act of consumption that a mass-produced object may turn into a beloved token of childhood, a reminder of a close person, or an expression of a profound emotion. Even in what many hold to be its worst impulses, capitalism can lead to the development of new cultural phenomena, which in some cases may even facilitate social change, in spite of the fairly common view that such developments are futile. One can think about 1980s children's cartoons, of which the chief—if not the only—purpose was to sell toys. Some of the children who nagged their parents for new toys during trips to supermarkets are now adult collectors of the same dolls and action figures that originally were imagined as a highway to their parents' pockets. This includes both those produced by major corporations, as well as small, third party initiatives catering specifically for these *de facto* connoisseur markets. They even have the capacity to challenge social norms, as illustrated by Bronies, adult male collectors of toys associated with the *My Little Pony* franchise, traditionally marketed towards girls. It is additionally noteworthy how often the struggle for civil rights was focused on access to consumed goods and services (e.g. Livingston 89, 99; Greenberg 241-243; Weems 316-323). Others point out how the capitalist marketplace facilitated the creation of a negotiated American identity, crucial in the process of establishing immigrant communities (Heinze 19-27). This shows that capitalist consumer culture is a field in which a struggle for enfranchisement can be carried out.

Appleby's suggestion that recognizing capitalism as a cultural system allows one to better understand both those who criticize it, as well as those who praise it, and to see these two points of view as different sides of the same coin rather than contradictory approaches. Appleby ultimately sees capitalism not as a rigid, unmalleable construct, but as a flexible one, in which change is not only possible, but almost certain. As such, it is a living and organic structure, rather than just a series of economic and financial formulas and assumptions. It is a cultural system that evolves, which changes with every generation (ch. 1), and acknowledges that people can alter their consumption patterns owing to their experience (ch. 13).

Many of the problems with the criticisms of capitalism are associated with the fact that many critics assume that they exist outside this system, or that their consumer patterns represent proper and valid choices, in contrast to those of others. This is ironic, as they very often actually hold a privileged position in the capitalist hierarchy, and, as economists, scholars, experts and pundits, they can be considered workers of ideological state apparatuses. James B. Twitchell notices how many critics of capitalism in the academia fail to see themselves as occupying a privileged position in society (*Living It Up* 275-279), and do not take into account their own materialism, not realizing that choosing a Volvo over a BMW, or purchasing books in large quantities, can easily be qualified as such (*Lead Us into Temptation* 22-24; 35-37; 47-49). Tim di Muzio illustrates this with the case of a Chicago professor who lamented a possible increase in income taxes, claiming that he was not at all wealthy, and could not afford to pay the proposed rates. However, his annual income

of \$250,000 actually classified him as a member of the top 0.04% of global income earners (21-22). The problem in such cases is the tendency to use one's immediate environment as a point of reference. This beckons toward an ideological reading, in which such a setting would become normative and naturalized, casting other social groups as inferior, without taste and knowledge, characterized by passivity and proneness to manipulation at the hands of capitalists and business owners, all of which often are common criticisms of capitalism.

Seeing capitalism as a true cultural system allows one to better understand such criticism. It reminds us that such qualifications are levied from within that culture, along with its doxa and hierarchy of cultural capital. It is for this reason that the critics are refuted on the grounds that they dismiss or do not understand certain cultural tastes. Although the recognition of voices both criticizing as well as celebrating capitalism does not revolutionize discourse pertaining to this topic, it reminds us that a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon requires one to take into account various perspectives with their contexts. This issue, as glib as it may sound, is a common problem found in the writings of those who dismiss authors they disagree with as either dupes of capitalism, or as intellectually myopic moralists. Examples would include authors such as Grant McCracken, James Twitchell, Thorstein Veblen, Vance Packard, Jean Baudrillard, Theodore Adorno, Frederic Jameson, among others.

The recognition of capitalism as a culture may also provide more information on issues that are otherwise difficult to answer, such as the peculiar dynamics found in the shifting ideologies related to the market, particularly in times of crisis. Appleby did not believe that such changes would be rapid or revolutionary, and she stated that such situations as the 2008 crisis and the subsequent Great Recession are more than likely to repeat in the future (ch. 13). However, she was cautiously optimistic about this issue. Her narrative suggests that the redefined norms pertaining to the amount of acceptable market regulation, the relationships of big business and legislators, etc. are not the results of careful economic consideration, but of the cultural trauma caused by such downturns. History shows that this is not unprecedented. After the crash of 1929 the support for government regulation grew greatly, and many of these changes lasted for over a generation. The approach only changed after the 1970s, as a result of new problems, such as stagflation and the fuel crisis, which took support away from Keynesian policies. This was a factor that led to a massive wave of deregulation in the subsequent years, which many see as contributing heavily to the most recent financial crisis (e.g. Geisst 410-413, 433-436, 446). Americans are now again rethinking their approach to the market, and the topic has become more prominent in culture. The Occupy movement, although it seems to have all but disappeared, gave Americans new nomenclature with the 99% (Di Muzio 198-199). The accessibility of the American Dream became a widely-discussed issue, and class division in the U.S. started receiving more attention. Literature also started paying more heed to these issues, and one can name such novels as Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*, Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* or William Gibson's *The*

Peripheral as examples. Some writers tried to understand the wealthiest members of American society, which can be illustrated by such novels as Sophie McManus's *The Unfortunates* and Jonathan Dee's *The Privileges*.

The view of capitalism as a cultural system also provides insight into the peculiarities of the most recent elections. The economic downturn of 2007-2012 very likely contributed to a general unwillingness of Americans to endorse candidates seen as accommodating for big business. This may help understand how Donald Trump's assurances that he was self-funded enticed many conservative voters to choose him over other candidates the Republican party considered for nomination. This also explains why the younger generations—those who at the moment tend to believe that they will not be capable of attaining a higher economic status than their parents—embraced Bernie Sanders, and shunned away from Hilary Clinton, who was often accused of being a representative of the forces that contributed to the growing inequality in the U.S., as well as the most recent recession.

Joyce Oldham Appleby, born on April 9th, 1929, died December 23rd 2016, was a distinguished American historian. She was the former president of the Organization of American Historians, the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, and the American Historical Association. She also was Harold Vyvyan Harmsworth Professor of American History, and a Guggenheim fellow.

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