

Driving Pleasure to the Precipice: Disjunction of Culture in Crisis

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Abstract

The double edged sword of capitalism despite its pre oriented drive for pleasure at moments sees through the double binding of catastrophe and extinction. But it professes the yearning for the new civilizational process of coexistence among human and the non-human. Freudian ‘Pleasure Principle’ and the contrastively connoted ‘Reality Principle’ are two such tenable axes that could be read alongside the individual and collective conscious with deep subterranean trajectories now in the contemporary time of Anthropocene! Desire, like capital becomes autonomous beyond conscious human intervention and moves along the tidal wave of profit, utility and self-centric pragmatism and loses itself in the dark hole of self-extinction bringing cataclysmic threat for an overall tragedy. Freud cited in his momentous treatise *Civilization and Its Discontent*, the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos and on the same plane brings his “Beyond the pleasure principle”, which as he says reiterates or insists repetition as a compulsive drive. He also refers to this principle of pleasure as the core drive that entails the “purpose of life. So with this self-centric agenda, humans or maybe the lords of the capital could now put up with a last endeavor to stall the self-destructive victory march that would hurl everyone down the precipice. To revert this maybe the same norms need to be revoked, same ethics applied to the individual and the collective. In the wake of the crisis unfolding before the world, the endless growth of capitalism needs to be curbed by rigid social and moral code of conduct, a rationalization of consumption, sustainable water distribution in equitable manner and production of renewable energy sources. So ultimately. This honest partaking of the resources is the strict imperative in this moment of crisis.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Capital, Desire, Pleasure, Real and Reality

Introduction

The title of my paper seemingly offers a kind of reductionist logic and has a fear of annihilation integrated within it, but does not seem to frighten anybody. This criticism of humanity targets those creating stories that stimulate the fear-inducing adrenal gland of ‘the people’ consuming the media. They are referring constantly to climate change, global warming, and the depletion of ozone layers etc. But is it only a myth that climates are changing worldwide?

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Published: 12 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45517>

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What has actually gone wrong? In actual practice, and not only on the surface, human civilization has reached the highest pinnacle of success; science and technology have provided humans with the newest of innovations, the comfort level of the urbane living does not seem to know any bounds, yet the majority of people are self-absorbed in their preoccupations and do not seem to take any interest in the surroundings. At the same time, heavy burning of fossil fuels, coal, oil and gas are creating heat-trapping gases which will result in catastrophic changes in the weather and climate. Rising sea levels and rising ocean temperatures are indicators of this changing climate; as are frequent droughts, storm, hail and melting glaciers, which all implicitly harm the non-human animals living in the vicinity. On the surface of it, deliberations on ecology and disastrous human intervention seem like indifferent dispassionate deliberations on climate change that do not concern anyone except Greta Thunberg's fans. But what is materially significant, and for whom? That seems to be a vital question.

What is the essence of these debates? As the environment is altered drastically there are high rewards along with high risk. This is emerging as a major concern., The most crucial question that seems to bother everyone now is whether the developmental model is going to be most fructifying in an absolute sense or in various economies (as in the third world countries) is it is going to be essentially counterproductive? This chapter will argue that the present tussle between the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene needs to be seen and observed very carefully. The Marxian or Hegelian dialectic seeks to resolve and evolve to a third state of transcendent resolving mechanism. In this context David Harvey in a perceptive analysis, refers to Marx's attempt to make a "spatial fix as a remedy to the contradiction of accumulated capital, left in abeyance by Hegel. It was perhaps by colonial expansion that problem was to be solved as seen by Marx." (1998, pp. 52-54) But what about the way out of this crucial dialectic? Or is it going to be like an object of diminishing utility more and more, as time passes and we are driven to the edge?

Growth of Capital and Capitalistic Market Economy

The growth of capital in its enormous capacity for accumulation of wealth and profit is constantly on the move forward and that becomes a conglomerate for global peril. The problematic that seems to loom large in the horizon has its source (as one would try to decipher) in a divergent areas, forums and institutions. But what is most relevant now is an objective and unbiased approach to arrive at truth or fact. The scientific approach towards climate change or depletion of ozone layer or any other incidental phenomena is the crux around which humanity must revolve now. But what is the state of affairs or economy or culture here pertaining to humankind that seems to bear the imminent danger to man himself? The self-reflexivity which seems to characterize man now in a postmodernist glare is bouncing back in the most accurate sense.

To write a short thesis on the capitalist market economy now will not be an easy effort, although it's the most recognizable fact that capitalism has traversed its joyful ride of evolution most concretely over the last odd century. What had begun as a bright anticipation to a new world condition with science, enlightenment and mechanical support to the ailing and fatigued human muscles became immediately a growth machine, a juggernaut, a radical

terminator of all human feelings and concerns. This ever-greedy obsessive mindless destroyer of love, compassion, relationships and simple life ethics only had its very scrupulous eye for capital growth and monetary profit everywhere at all times. The emergence of capitalism wasn't any innocent occurrence in history. As predicted by Marx and Engels in their monumental epic *Communist Manifesto*, the rise of capitalism was the concurrent event of the rise of the Bourgeois as the most dominant class in the society (Panitch 1998, 249-250). The historical processes couldn't be radically changed and change is the most significant constant in the society. So the culture and society that grew was the most capital centric one and money was the prime motivator in the environment. The next phase of history that evolved in the twentieth century proved to be the most vigorous one with the sky-rocketing advancement in science and technology. The next significant malady that infected the world was the overwhelming expansion of the markets and the intensive influence it began to exert on individuals, society and culture.

Now the question is how this overall strategy for development and progress is said to have rebounded and the collective psyche is being profoundly disturbed. In order to answer these queries, one doesn't need to go to specifics as there is much evidence from the last two decades or so that the future of the earth, and also humanity, are supposedly, or maybe surely, at peril. Here at this juncture and at this opportune moment if we begin substantiating the incidences, concurrent events (natural or otherwise) and to repeat the consequent general events, we would exhaust the scope of the paper. So instead what we'll attempt at now, is to elaborate how hazardous the institution of capitalism is, and indict it for the deep scars and wounds that it has created on the face of the earth.

Capitalism has changed the Topography

Capitalism has changed the face of the world entirely. Speedier modes of communication have joined places and people and the highway networking has entirely annihilated the natural topography of places. Hundreds and thousands of trees are being cut every day in the name of progress and developments. Forests are being erased schematically, flora and fauna of the eco-friendly zones are being destroyed methodically. The rationale behind every work of construction or building operations is the necessity and comfort of the human species. This is a widespread and well accepted notion that capitalist market economies have spawned its tentacles of profit mongering into every tenable and imaginable area possible.

How do we envision a future for humanity when each and every substantial evidence available speaks about a changed earth scenario? The material and spiritual devastation of too much of scientific innovations and advancements very surely has created a world that does not care about anything, apart from its capitalistic proliferation and monetary profit. The gradually ascending graphs of the defence budgets of advanced countries only foreshadows of vast destructions of impending war. The apprehension of humanity's self-injuring drives has gone overboard and persons with sanity could very well gauze the perilous path undertaken by humanity. These self-evident proofs could be accepted unconditionally.

The Source of Growth is in the Mind

The rise of capital has given rise to a condition which brought the human society to a monumental shift in progress and profit which again in a circular manner like a chain grows in desire or greed. How is this desire progressing in a most dangerous manner and how the graph drawn on a scale escalates most illogically? The mining corporations in the sub-Saharan extracting gold, copper, limestone, uranium, diamond, etc are economically very lucrative, but they are throttling the life from the land and in the name of progress sapping the very blood of nature. The MNCs and their mining activities in DRC, South Africa, Namibia and other countries have affected forestation adversely, land quality is degrading and most certainly air pollution is spreading. The health hazards because of rampant mining and involvement of minors are dealt with elaborately in a survey published in *Globalization and Health* (18 2022) by Herminio Cossa et al. and it refers to various affects, detrimental and otherwise of the activities: “mining activities can have adverse effects on child health and development.” (Cossa 2022, 13-14).

The most important 20th century theorist of the human mind, Sigmund Freud, writes of the vast impact of the drives or instincts on the development of human personality. In one of his most mature treatises, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud refers to the process of change that human beings have gone through because of scientific discoveries and technological advancement. He observes that in spite of “these achievements ... the fulfilment of an age-old longing has not increased the amount of pleasure they can expect from life or made them feel any happier.” Because, as he says, “that power over nature is not the sole condition of human happiness, just as it is not the sole aim of cultural endeavours, rather than to conclude that technical progress is of no value in the economy of our happiness”. (Freud 2004, 31-32) ..Though there are innumerable treatises on the various natures of drives or instincts by Freud, one very pertinent treatise is his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Besides drawing out convincingly the drive for pleasure principle, which lies at the source of all human actions, he also cites its tussle with the reality principle which could lead to conscious intervention into the irrepressibility of the drives for pleasure The drive for further perfection on part of human beings are constantly alive and this sets up a “striving for complete satisfaction” and “repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction”. But there would be constant tension as Freud says and the demand for satisfaction and achievement of it would be interrupted by a “backward path”. (2005, pp. 249 –250)

Sigmund Freud’s categorical distinction between two contrary states of the human mind, the two motivating principles namely the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle could lead to a relevant discussion of “the regulatory mechanism that represents the demands of the external world, and requires us to forgo or modify gratification or postpone it to a more appropriate time. In contrast to the Pleasure principle, which ... represents the id or instinctual impulses, the reality principle represents the ego, which controls our impulses and enables us to deal rationally and effectively with the situations of life.” Freud while discussing the ego instinct and the libido instinct in the same essay concludes in section V of it about the limitations of the drive for perfection. He says “...So there is no alternative but to advance in the direction in which growth is still free – though with no prospect of bringing the process to a conclusion or of being able to reach the goal.” So the next imperative is the obsessive desire for profit.

Desire for Profit

The most important peril that overshadows the earth and the human habitation now is the fear of extinction and fizzling out of the edifice of human civilization. The statement is a condensed proposition that takes into account the ominous sign of wiping out of various flora and fauna, climate change, depletion of ozone layer, wiping out of the tropical forests, and most of all the overall domination of capitalistic economy in the life and sense and philosophy of the individuals and communities. The incredible impact of market on the mind and sensibility of the people of our time signifies and points to the death penalty all human beings have to pay for the collective crime they have committed.

It's not very easy to put general charges against people. But the basis on which all these assessments are being done points to the very condition of capital profit mongering in each and every human activity and that becomes the source of humanity's tragedy and also happiness. The contentious question whether capitalism as a means of social growth and development is able to increase human happiness need not be answered directly, but another question as to how in the name of growth and development the environment is destroyed stealthily, gradually and most maliciously and how that has gathered concerned wild life biologists, environmentalists, conservationists and avid activists together, needs to be considered very seriously.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels have addressed the topic of the rise of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie together, since those were parallel events in human history (Panitch 1998, 241—242). But the relevant point that needs to be raised here is Marx's observation on the impact of money on man and mind. He was not a psychologist but this great social scientist saw in a prophetic gaze the imminent transformation in human behavior and resultantly in human relationship. The transformation of the modern society and the rise of the bourgeoisie are correlated and simultaneous events: "the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation." (Panitch 1998, 242) The birth of this new world dominated by the bourgeoisie would not rest in one place, for profit, as Marx had predicted, "the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe,. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere." (p. 243).

The rise of the bourgeoisie and capitalism and the market economy slowly gave rise to some concerns among thinkers and critics of capitalist society. Consequently, people began to feel that the ever-increasing desire for profit is changing face of the earth. In a very perceptive essay, "The Communist Manifesto and the Environment" John Bellamy Foster argues forcefully about Marx's concern for the degradation of environment (Panitch 1998, 169-170). Though for some this concern about environmental degradation on Marx's part was tangential, his main target was high capitalist logics. As a social scientist it was his duty to analyse the structure of the society in an objective manner and that's what he did. He was a critic of capitalistic growth and the concentration of national wealth in minority groups.

Capitalocene

Jason W Moore in a critically perceptive analysis called “On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis” probes into the overwhelming nature of dominance of capital as a determining source of present crisis and impending catastrophe. He cites as to why the state of dominance of the capitalocene is dangerous for human society? Simply because it very steadily and at a much faster pace brings us to results that we don’t want to recognize. Freud in his prominent treatise *Civilization and its Discontents* has candidly treated the drives that are antagonistic in nature but are coordinated together. As he says (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) “...I reached the conclusion that in addition to the drive to preserve the living substance and bring it together in ever larger units there must be another, opposed to it which sought to bring down these units.... Besides Eros, then, there was a death drive and the interaction and counteraction of these two could explain the phenomena of life.” (Freud, 2004, 70) The interaction of these two drives would occur together. (“appeared in isolation, but alloyed with one another ...” p71). The processes of “civilization of mankind and the development or upbringing of the individual “is almost similar in kind. Eros and death drives are in perennial conflict. The common goal of convenience, comfort and compatibility has led mankind to explore and achieve an avant-garde philosophy of life that is narcissistic and schizophrenic at the same time. If the paradigm change of beliefs and philosophies do make the humanity completely based and dependent on sheer fulfilment of pleasure principle, the analysis of the meaning of lives and living would be a tedious routine, that too a redundant and unnecessary one. To see it from a very opposing perspective, it would be revealed how brutal and destructive the process has become and how vulnerable we are in the face of that impersonal desire and obsession for capital accumulation.

Stanley Kubrick, the famous film maker uses a leitmotif that is a cruel, brutal and most deviant, but most appropriate trope, as it were, for the Capitalocene in his satiric black comedy *A Clockwork Orange*. Kubrick’s almost dystopic interpretation of the post-industrial society demystifies the conventional intervention of a convenient, delusional, comfort zone of the so-called bourgeoisie and creates the dysfunctional social scene of confusion, horror and carnal and intellectual brutality (Kalita 2022, 79- 82). The protagonist of the movie, Alex is an antisocial delinquent whose interests include classical music, especially of Beethoven, committing rape, arson and theft or what was known as “ultra violence”. This tense drama of metaphoric intensity often builds to almost unbearable crescendos. He leads a youth gang, satanic in its thrills and unscrupulous barbarity, and towards the end is shown to have entered a state-owned rehabilitation centre. The complete failure of redemption of this youngster exposed in a blurred manner by the author Anthony Burgess is changed to flexible ideas of change in the movie by Kubrick. The 21st chapter of the Burgess novel was never considered by the filmmaker, since his idea was that the redemption part was not tallying with the Alex character, and the mainstay theme of brutal events. So he cut that part and left the film and the fate of Alex most indeterminate and chaotic one. That matter doesn’t concern us here, but the idea of recovery and redemption though conventional and somewhat antiquarian, holds the key to the chief human project, which is very much relevant for our hypothesis.

The idea of flourishing capital as an institution and the changing dynamics of production to the evolution of a commercial society also demands that the interests of consumers are ultimately retained. But the most blatant irony that emerges out of this capitalistic strategy is that, as noted by Ellen Meiksins Wood in her perceptive book *Democracy Against Capitalism*, “The first thing about capitalism is that it is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits” (2007, p. 266). The author’s brilliant in-depth study of Marx’s historical materialism comments very perceptively about the effects of devastation of capitalism on ecology and her unorthodox opinion in this regard is “Nor do I think that capitalism can avoid ecological devastation” (p. 265).

It’s not that not many people have realized the impending threat of climate change or the issue is subordinated in forums for diverse political manoeuvres; the source of lack of enough action lies somewhere else. As Wood observes:

It [capitalism] may be able to accommodate some degree of ecological care, especially when the technology of environmental protection is itself profitably marketable. But the essential irrationality of the drive for capital accumulation, which subordinates everything to the requirement of the self-expansion of the capital and so called growth is unavoidably hostile to ecological balance (Wood 2007, 265).

Conclusion

These are self-evident facts and not many illustrations are needed. But what is primarily important is to know the sheer danger human beings are facing every passing day. The political economies and the policies of environment protection and conservation are far too less to confront the hazards looming in the horizon. Our present concern opens up almost a Pandora’s box and makes us confused before a thousand crisscrossing possibilities which invariably lead to one and only one inevitable ecological future for humanities. In this context history becomes an imperative, not because it’s about the past but because it’s about flexibility and malleability of forces and their interaction. Maybe here’s what gives us hope and also the challenges that await resolutions. How can we draw conclusions from this?

So ultimately the pleasure principle has to temper itself and under the influence of the external world transforms into “the more modest ‘reality principle’ as the pioneer researcher of the human mind contended” (Kalita 2020, 31). And our observation is that the mad onrush of ‘Pleasure hunters’ needs to be curtailed, their desire for profit alone needs to be dissipated, for a broader human benefit that would be availed by both humans and non-humans. This honest partaking of the resources is the strict imperative in this moment of crisis. We are moving along the edges, what we need to avoid is the obsessive compulsion to dive down the precipice.

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