

Why the World Hates Business

The mind of capitalism is cut off from its humanity

By Marjorie Kelly

I've been thinking lately about why the world hates business so much.

I was talking to a reporter the other day about the magazine, explaining that we emphasize socially responsible business—those businesses doing good things in the world—and she was suddenly compelled to remind me, “But not all businesses are good.” If I had said I was doing a magazine about exceptional leaders, would she have reminded me that not all leaders are exceptional? Why this defensiveness at the idea that there might be responsible business somewhere in the world?

Another day not long ago, I happened to breakfast with a British gentleman from an academic publishing house. We were discussing what intersection there might be between our business audience and his academic books, and he made the passing remark, “Most academics think business people are stupid—and by and large they're right, of course.” He said it as if it were an inside joke among the chosen, the literate, making fun of the great unwashed—as though certainly everyone knows that business people are stupid.

How is it that business has come to such a pass? How is it that capitalism has come to be cast, so reflexively and unthinkingly, as the bad guy?

I read an interesting observation recently, that socialism is always spoken of as the dream it might be, while capitalism is spoken of as the disappointing reality it is. However dismal the real-life results of socialism, there remains a warm glow around the ideal, while the “glow” around capitalism might be better described as a sinister cloud. Capitalism just doesn't feel warm and fuzzy. Countries like the Soviet Union may grudgingly accept that they need the free market's bag of tricks, but they adopt them warily and with suspicion.

“It is seriously misleading to think that socialism is dead,” wrote William Halal and Alexander Nikitin in *The Futurist*. “It is equally wrong to believe that capitalism will soon spread throughout the globe.” The reason, they said, is that people in socialist countries fear capitalism; they fear its competitiveness, its lack of concern for the underdog. Somehow they feel cared for in a socialist structure, and fear their needs will be abandoned

in a capitalist one.

These are feelings we would do well to heed. However well our economic system produces material goods, many people perceive a hollowness at its core. Why is that? Why do Soviets facing empty bread shelves fear a free market that might feed them? Why do many academics share a barely disguised contempt for business people who are clearly intelligent? Why are reporters suspicious of the notion of socially responsible business?

I suspect the reason has less to do with reality than ideology. People fear capitalism, perhaps, because its ideology professes indifference toward the human condition.

The words we use in capitalism are cold words, abstractions, like “profit,” or the “bottom line,” while the words wrapped around socialism are words of human caring, like “equality,” or “fairness.” Capitalist language is the language of accountants and ledger books. Socialist language is the language of human community.

I'm speaking quite deliberately here of words and language, for the reality is quite different. The rhetoric of socialism often cloaks an iron fist of authoritarianism and privation, while the rhetoric of capitalism veils a palm of freedom and abundance.

Yet even while capitalism excels at meeting human needs, it pretends not to care about them. Few companies produce products “because the world needs them”—they produce what will sell at a profit. And when someone like William Norris of Control Data comes along and says unmet human needs are a business opportunity, and tries to prove it by putting factories in the inner city, fellow business people cheer when he stumbles. The business press loves nothing better than to trumpet the woes of Control Data as proof that social goals have no place in a capitalist enterprise.

Capitalism not only professes indifference to the human condition, it shouts and sneers indifference. This is what enrages people, just as it would enrage them to have a president who said she cared nothing for the nation she governed, or to have a father who said he was indifferent to his children. However well those children or that nation were cared for, they would still hate their father or

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their president. And so it may be that people come to hate capitalism.

For you see, caring about human needs is more than a social nicety to be tagged onto our corporations as an afterthought. Meeting human needs is the fundamental purpose of business. Economies exist not to generate numbers but to feed and clothe and shelter the populace. All of us are struggling to survive and thrive in the world, and we form businesses to provide what others require, driven not by altruism but by that mixture of self-interest and market opportunity that makes one person's need another person's business. Profit may be the method of keeping score—a very necessary method—but to say it is the "point" is to make ledger books more real than human bodies.

That capitalism is brilliant is without question. But when we limit its focus to profit, we treat it like a head alienated from the body, a mind divorced from its soul. We make it abstract, a cerebral numbers game. And this has consequences for all of us.

It has consequences for me, certainly. For too long, I feel I have existed primarily from the neck up, as a mind active in the world, defined only by what I do professionally. I pursue my business goals sometimes at the expense of my physical well-being—working until 2:30 in the morning, sacrificing weekends, ignoring the warning signals of my body. Echoing the ideology of capitalism, my business life is a life driven by the head—a life of pushing and striving, trying to control the world through sheer will power. But when I live from my body, I live in community, for bodies are natural parts of the world, in touch with natural rhythms.

I don't mean simply that I want to get more exercise, or I intend to eat better. I don't mean I hope to be more perfect. What I crave is to be fully alive in myself, fully present in my days and in my body.

Jungian analyst and author Marion Woodman writes about becoming "fully ensouled," "fully embodied" in our lives. "Driven to do our best at school, on the job, in our relationships—in every corner of our lives—we try to make ourselves into works of art," she writes. "Working so hard to create our own perfection we forget that we are human beings."

One result is addiction, the active numbing of our deeper feelings. And work is the drug of choice for the managerial class, for as Diane Fassel writes in *Working Ourselves to Death*, work addiction "is the cleanest of all the addictions." It is "the pain that

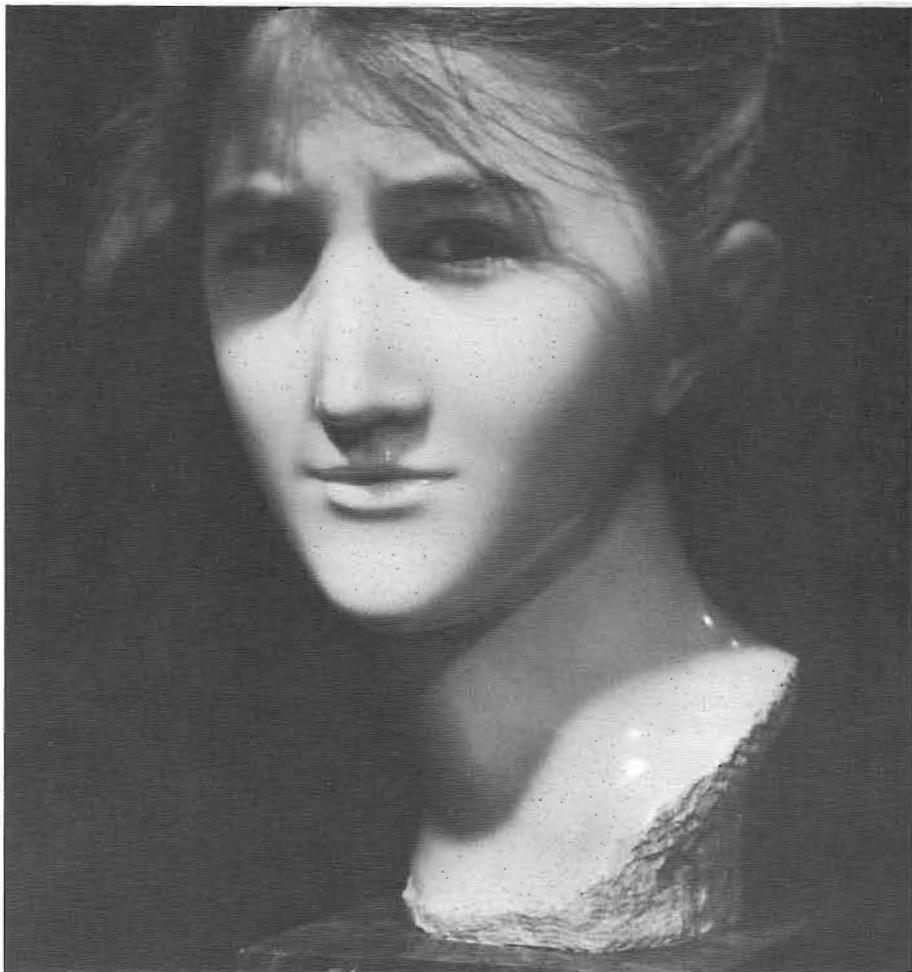
others applaud." Workaholism for Fassel is defined not so much by the amount of work we do, as by the role work plays in our lives. "When work is the sole reservoir for your identity," she says, "you are addicted."

One of the most hopeful signs today, I believe, is that more and more professionals are beginning to question this slavish devotion to work. More and more of us are beginning to really listen to our bodies, to the longings deep inside ourselves—turning down a promotion that means uprooting our family, deciding to scale back and work less, moving to the country, leaving a corporation to launch a business closer to one's heart.

As more and more of us become fully ensouled in our lives, perhaps we can allow business to become ensouled. By reclaiming our own lives, perhaps we can help reclaim the essence of capitalism—as a system that exists not to feed the bottom line, but to serve human needs.

If capitalism is hated because it professes indifference to the human condition, we might heal that hatred by caring first for ourselves as human beings—caring first for ourselves not simply as business minds with goals and ambitions, but as bodies eager to live, bodies aching to come alive and play in the beckoning world. ✎

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