

# Post-Capitalism, the Age of Greed and Public Memory

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Economists rarely engage with culture, so cultural professionals, even if awkwardly, resort to economic arguments to describe the present or future troubles of museums and similar cultural institutions. As neoliberalism—a hypocritical, almost circus-like, and certainly grotesque rampage—damages civil society (one of the great achievements of the West), it also destroys the institutions and professions on which that society is built.

The practice finds solutions, but concepts lead or save—though they may be born within practice itself. However, clever fixes do not eliminate the problem that created them. Post-capitalism, the Age of Greed, has countless tricks and illusions with which it tyrannizes the world, but the total privatization of the world, alongside wars, seems the most effective way to seize power—the very heart of evil. Selfishness does not build society; it dismantles it. It does not ennoble humanity; rather, it degrades and devalues the human species.

A slide that caught my students' attention on what might seem a dull topic was about the concept of a "living wage"—a minimum income sufficient for housing and food—as a symptomatic devaluation of labour for the growing profit of the infamous 1%. Naturally, the wealthy see this as yet another obvious "Marxist" manipulation. Searching for "living wage" online, one finds a caricature, steeped in powerful black humour, depicting a fat capitalist riding on the back of an exhausted worker, exclaiming: "First they demanded an end to slavery... then a minimum wage, so-called 'living wage,' which actually means fair and decent compensation... Corporations denounce it as communism."

I used this in several lectures, with varying emphases, as a way to awaken my students and make them aware that museums do not exist outside economic or political realities

(<https://www.mnemosophy.com/post/2019/06/04/post-capitalism-is-against-museums-too>).

Whatever their worldview, I thought it was worth provoking them. Today's capitalism is no longer an exchange of goods and services. It is solely about profit and, therefore, no longer capitalism in the true sense of the word. Work—expertise, competence, and experience—has been reduced to "portable skills" brought to the labour market without the right to negotiate. The financialization of societies has shifted the economic system's focus toward banking and

finance. The culture of work—not just the alleged ideology behind it—has been devalued. What has become crucial is success, measured by earned money and social influence.

There is increasingly less dignity in well-done work that is appropriately rewarded. The working class has ceased to exist, and with it, the traditional political configuration, now in a critical transition or, rather, complete chaos. A financialized society affirms profit at the lowest cost, making Western societies grotesque as they devour the essence of their once-idealistic visions of prosperity. Only one-third of university employees in the United States are permanent lecturers; the lowest third are mere contractors, while the upper third consists mainly of administrative staff. Education has become a market commodity at its own expense—and that of the society that depends on it.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a social welfare proposal in which all citizens of a given population regularly receive a minimum income as an unconditional transfer, without a means test or work requirement. It is a well-known experiment that supposedly leads to freedom but ultimately devalues labour and humanity. AI appears to be the final paradoxical eugenic project of humanity which, if it gets out of control (as it likely will in the West), could, as Stephen Hawking warned, bring about "the end of the human race." One aspect of this downfall will be the loss of the ability to recognize and rely on reality. In a global hall of mirrors, museums and similar institutions appear to be rare solid footholds when we lose ground beneath our feet.

## Museums

Forty years ago, I wrote about the museological experience of Disneyland and mentioned how a visit to that then-still-naïve world of illusions began: "When a group of visitors gathered, the floor of the room silently began to descend; the pictures on the walls seemed to rise higher and higher, and the ground beneath their feet felt increasingly distant, less real—less the ground they had stepped on in the real world." Well, that is how AI will affect us. The new heroes of humanism and wisdom will be those who keep us anchored in reality or help us retain the ability to recognize it among illusions.

Museums? I would consider this their fundamental mission. This seemingly non-museum-like introduction to reality is precisely because of that. Museums preserve everything we have decided to recognise, collect, study, and pass on as the building material of reality and, logically, a usable or even better future for the communities that sustain them.

The problem, as we will see in the next instalment, is that post-capitalism seeks to create circumstances in which there is no public funding for socially beneficial projects. As has always been the case, those who bear the costs (of science, culture, institutions, creativity...) also determine the goals and reach.

## Ugly world

There is neither a need nor arguments to support the belief that justice has ever been the ruling criterion of profit over quality. However, to devalue truth, labour, and justice and insist on the priority of mere financial success is a far-reaching mistake. Fundamental values are more or less universal, but they can be manipulated. In global politics, the equivalent of the fascination with profit is the ambition for world hegemony. The latter is, in fact, a downright foolish and harmful project, entirely unnecessary in a world that is shrinking and increasingly in need of solidarity. This is the only globalization that is justified and essential.

Modern society is already alienated by insecurity, unrest, discomfort, frustration, and the consequent escape from reality. We see symptoms of collective neurosis, a rift between an unprecedented concern for human rights and their simultaneous erosion, between a concern for the disenfranchised and minorities and the ever-tightening space for personal freedoms, with an increasingly ruthless tyranny over minorities. With around a hundred million refugees and displaced persons, the world is becoming an ugly and dangerous place.

## ..And museums again

And, to finally mention museums—don't you think they are rarely talked about? When they are, and there are good museums, one can easily recognize the political narrative beneath the seemingly purely humane nobility. Museums have never been entirely autonomous or apolitical, especially given that the very governments they serve are complicit in global suffering. In a scenario where global politics result in a humanitarian catastrophe, museums cannot (perhaps do not even know how to) and certainly must not speak openly, even with the help of independent, objective science. Both culture and science have precisely as much freedom as permitted within the implicitly established boundaries.

As a former art history curator, I am astounded by how contemporary art, for example, is a myth of unconditional originality, individualism, and self-exclusion from reality—part of a global conspiracy rather than the conscience of the world. Dominant politics dictate and

control professional careers—subtly yet mercilessly. From science to art, from medicine to physics... We in the West know that there are no accidental, unpredictable, or politically whimsical directors and responsible curators. Democracy is reduced to allowing them to exist, to inexplicably lose their mandates and support, yet not to be exiled or imprisoned.

Still some time before the world wars, great capitalists were thrilled to cement their immortality by donating collections to museums and having their names engraved on marble plaques in museum halls. Then American corporate oligarchic "robber barons" discovered that, in addition to avoiding taxes by turning wealth into collections, they could also obtain a free building from the state for their own private museum. This practice has spread to Europe. Today, in Europe, donations are made only by a few benevolent citizens. American museums are all private anyway, and this testimony concerns them only as the ongoing fate of the profession. Europe, which still predominantly has public museums, will have to painfully relinquish its public service in offering socially formed, responsible knowledge for development and prosperity.

Despite the efforts of the profession and culture in general, the museum has become either the prey of its own poor tradition (as a dull scientific institution), a stage for someone's ego, or an entertainment venue—an attraction whose goal is to generate profit. This danger, which many still fail to see, is the reason for this probably tedious testimony from within the profession, which I now share.

We have established that modern economics is not an exact science and that all models that bypass fundamental humanistic ethics are doomed to costly failure. Without moralizing, it seems that wrongdoing carries a price. The world of global corporations and mega finance deliberately creates chaos—whether through transitions in some countries or wars in others. For them, hunting for large prey means subjecting the world entirely to their control. This is done by sowing discord and creating confusion. Citizens, in turn, must be controlled through fear and insecurity, the breakdown of fundamental traditional supports that civil practice has transformed into freedoms and a manageable world.

## Hypocrisy

The world we have inherited is the most hypocritical in human history, so museums, as the bearers of quality public memory, may not seem like the greatest problem at first glance. In the name of human rights—and women's rights—wars are waged, and there are even women's and gender studies. Yet, there remains the fact that the European Parliament had to

pass a law obliging all economic entities to pay women the same salary for doing the same work as men (!). Naturally, any corrupt, unreliable system will inevitably collapse, but—just to illustrate—the profit is always private, while the losses are invariably socialized. Citizens have been manipulated into believing they are witnessing a natural process of social Darwinism.

So-called neoliberal economics is a cynical euphemism for an obscene fraud. Any independently thinking individual can observe that this has only become possible since total capitalism gradually abolished ideologies, replacing them not with traditional, evolved capitalism but with its harmful, deviant forms—where money is omnipotent and concentrated in the hands of a handful of individuals (masked by the illusion of multitude: some as corporations, others as anonymous shareholders).

By obsessively focusing on constant profit growth, they have created an era of Great Greed. It differs from previous epochs by its ruthless exclusivity and lack of alternatives. And everything begins and ends with culture—its memory, its credibility, and the application of its accumulated experiences. Globalization threatened us with acculturation, which the well-informed called Americanization, only for it to become clear that it was a political and economic project. Worse still, it turned out to be a process of de-culturation, or outright de-culturization, because only then can culture seamlessly become mere merchandise—a commodity for profit.

The conventional institutions of public memory, which are at the heart of this process, are powerless.

## Great Greed

Great Greed is a concept I first introduced in a lecture in 2005. I have often written about it, unaware that others had described our time in the same way. This means I was justified in stating in one of my slides: "The Great Greed turns humans into insecure addicts of illusions, who flee from freedom, flee from reality, and fall prey to collective hysteria." More than ever before, our technology blurs the boundaries between reality and mere illusion. We have always played with this distinction. Any story told or book read can transport us to another reality. But now, with Second Life, AI, AR, 3D Imagineering, and interactive video-games, we are immersed not just in the image but in the event itself, a reality of its own. As much as it may sound conceptual and only intellectually challenging things change even physically but, as it goes, with conceptual consequences: a Chinese museum (2023) has a robot

employed as registrar. The decisions upon its function and behaviour, in the best case, are made by some benign artificial intelligence. But as some theoreticians are already claiming, the true attribute would be “alien” intelligence, as it lacks by definition the emotional and conscious character of human one.

“Omnimax” was the final stage of the classic game of making us feel lost in a reality other than our own: the screen and sound fully captured our attention. But that was nothing compared to what we are exposed to now or what we can reasonably expect in the future. If used for play and pleasure, for gaining insight into otherwise unknown worlds, this could enhance our engagement with life. However, no one is there to observe when we become lost in this alternate reality. I believe that technology-oriented museums are like grandparents and family—always on our side while also guiding us and encouraging us to trust our natural instincts. We seek adventure, but we also need guidance and secure places where the ground beneath our feet remains a firm point of departure and return.

If these circumstances are combined with the fact that, unlike any civilization before us, we live in an age of Great Greed—where no overarching principle keeps technology in check—it is likely that many will fall victim to rising insecurity. Products offered to us are no longer necessarily for our benefit; rather, they are primarily designed for the profit of producers and sellers.

In such a complex and hazardous reality, people will seek various forms of escape. Some will become addicted to illusions, others will turn utterly selfish and isolated, while others still will fall prey to collective hysteria, extreme ideologies, or radical beliefs. In this sense, museums will have an enormous role to play, particularly if they strive to explain the world around us. They can help ensure that we do not lose sight of humanist ethics, which offer a reliable framework for individuals who may waver, without taking away their freedom in exchange for security.

### Great Greed as the Face of Globalization

With profit as the prevailing ideology on the planet, we may end up leaving the hope of a better world behind. The era of Great Greed means that societies—especially those of the so-called enlightened, declining, and paradoxically decadent West—are consumed by the frenzy of conquest and superiority, rather than by the ideology of peace, collective good, and environmental protection.

It seems evident that our memory institutions and academic disciplines, along with history itself, have failed to rise above their task of merely accumulating knowledge. The global village has overflowing granaries, yet no one has learned how to bake bread. Just as artificial intelligence today represents the apotheosis of knowledge, all previous forms of flourishing knowledge have meant nothing more than increased possibilities and greater responsibilities. However, humanity wields opportunities beyond its own competence. Once AI and robotics impose their superiority upon us—and they already surpass us in many ways—we will need all our creativity to survive our own eugenic projections. Mathematically and statistically, we will appear clumsy and powerless in the face of new technology's capabilities.

At first, globalization seemed like complete domination over nature, or its subjugation, as advised in the Bible. If this continues, it is likely to lead to the end of humanity as we know it. The boom in museums is not a sign of our progress but rather a symptom of our struggles and an attempt to respond to evolving needs. Museums serve as forces that re-establish, reconstruct, or reinvent what would otherwise be part of a functioning value system, or that would develop naturally in response to changing circumstances. This suggests that we have lost the innate wisdom every culture holds—if interpreted correctly. Globalization represents the massive burden of problems we carry on our shoulders, facilitating the doctrine of perpetual growth and legitimizing ceaseless conquest as the natural pattern of human behaviour and societal development.

### The sin of corporate economy

The original sin of Western civilization is the CORPORATION—its blind pursuit of the fastest and greatest possible profit on behalf of organized interest. The corporate spirit instinctively evokes in people's minds a primitive horde or a pack of hyenas hunting their prey. Is that why a corporation is referred to as an anonymous society, group, conglomerate, holding, or other terms that suggest its faceless nature?

Cooperation and networking, when built on the foundations of identity formation and collective interests, have historically created the world as we know it. Taken to the extreme, however, these same principles can also destroy it. This primitive, aggressive character of corporations is likely the reason behind their anonymity. The financialization of the world has demonstrated that corporations can deteriorate into increasingly sinister forms of exploitation. They corrode the fabric of society by enslaving the legal system, redefining the economic

system, dismantling the concept of the social contract in politics, and ultimately devaluing the notion of community through the illusion of glorified individual rights.

By blurring the ideals of collective well-being in a healthy society, corporations ultimately deconstruct and degrade the value systems upon which culture is built. Their strategic prey is the mechanisms of memory and the construction of public memory, which in turn shape the criteria by which all societal actors operate.

Initially, globalization appeared to be a form of Americanization serving a unipolar world in its pursuit of global dominance. Now, it seems more like deliberate anarchy, in which even democracy becomes impossible. Every attempt at healthy networking based on social ideals is discredited by chaos and endless fragmentation of individual interests. Civil society, which should ideally function as a space of collective agency, has been proclaimed an alternative mechanism to institutions and professions whose task is to ensure social prosperity.

Meanwhile, democracy itself has become a process of continuous redefinition of interests, maintaining constant scrutiny over bureaucratic and professional privileges.

You may have noticed: art, science, public intellectuals, and some research institutions are all either under threat or disappearing altogether. They are dangerous sources of impartial, vibrant societal engagement aimed at permanent, endless project of social harmony, the rule of law, and peace in ever changing and more challenging circumstances.

**(This text is a triply expanded, reinterpreted subchapters “Post-capitalism is against museums, too”, “The Great Greed” and other two attached to it, from the book *Public Memory in a Deluded Society: Notes of a Lecturer*, available at [https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/11/2022\\_tomislav\\_sola\\_public\\_memory.pdf](https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/11/2022_tomislav_sola_public_memory.pdf) , as well as at <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>).**