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Individualism and Morality in the Post-communist Capitalism

Dan Ioan Dascălu^{a,*}^a Associate Professor PhD, „Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract

Today, there has been an increasing interest in the likely existence of a moral capitalism, which is able to combine the capitalist's own interest with the public good. In fact, real capitalisms could be positioned on a scale with the wild capitalism at one end and the moral capitalism at the other. This debate is even more important and topical in the former communist countries, which want to implement a capitalist economic system and which, unfortunately, are faced with extreme forms of wild or crony capitalism. On the other hand, the capitalist system involves individualism as its underlying ideology. However, individualism is far from being a unitary ideology; rather, it is more appropriate to discuss individualisms. For instance, the post-modern society has imposed the hedonistic individualism, which constitutes the foundation and drive of consumerism. In the communist regimes, which are officially connected to a collectivist ideology, forms of a survival individualism appear as a perverse effect of the economic, political, and social context, which continue even after the fall of communism. However, the deep vein of individualism, which has certain humanistic characteristics, is not in opposition to the moral capitalism; on the contrary, it sustains it. In the former communist countries, which are still in the process of building and consolidating their new political and economic system, the influence of these individualisms is deeply felt and they generate and manifest various and often contradictory forms of capitalism.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyse some aspects of the relationship between individualism as an ideology and the likely existence of a moral capitalism, which is able to combine the private with the public interest in the former

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0040 744516275;
E-mail address: didascalu@yahoo.com

communist countries that replaced the economy on order with a market capitalist economy. The starting point of our analysis is the observation of the situation in Romania today.

2. Ethical perspectives on capitalism

First, we need to clarify the way in which we approach the relationship between the ethical and the economic in capitalism. According to the way they approach this relationship, different thinkers, economists, sociologists, and ethicists situate themselves closer or further away from two extreme positions. One of the extremes may be represented by Max Weber, who, in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, considered that the ethics of puritanism could be considered a strong lever for the expansion of that concept on life, which the great German sociologist called “the spirit of capitalism” (Weber, 1993). At the other end, for instance, André Comte-Sponville (2004), who claims that, in fact, capitalism can be considered neither moral, nor immoral could be situated. The French ethicist talks about the existence of four types of order: the economic, technical and scientific order; the political and judiciary order; the moral order; and the order of love. They must not be mistaken for one another. In this case, capitalism cannot be judged as moral or immoral, but rather amoral, e.g. alien to the moral order.

The ones who accept the idea that capitalism as an economic system can also be analysed from a moral point of view situate themselves on different grounds. Some consider that capitalism can be anything but moral. Along this line of thought, we should mention the utopian socialists first and foremost. In his well-known work *Qu'est-ce que la propriété*, published in 1840, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1840) wrote that “la propriété c'est le vol.” Although a critic of Proudhon, Karl Marx maintains the same attitude towards capitalism. Situating himself in the position of the proletariat, he considered that this economic system meant exploitation, alienation, and inequality. “The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size” (Marx, 1968), and, further on, “Private property is, thus, the product, the result, the necessary consequence of self-alienated labour” (Marx, 1968).

Others, as Stephen Young, for example, consider the possible existence of a moral capitalism, which presupposes a “large as possible zone of interpenetration between virtue and private interest” (Young, 2009). Moreover, under the circumstances of our times, such a form of capitalism would be the only one capable of ensuring both the maintenance and development of capitalist companies and acquisition of profit.

3. Types and forms of individualism

Beyond these conflicting positions regarding the morality of capitalism, it is generally accepted that individualism as a world view is connected to the birth and evolution of capitalism. However, we need to make it clear that the concept of individualism refers to a very diverse reality. Individualism takes various forms. For instance, Steven Lukes spoke of political, economic, ethical, religious, epistemological, and methodological individualism (Lukes, 2006). Pierre Birnbaum and Jean Leca mention a number of individualisms: romantic, market, juridical, ethical, sociological, and epistemological (Birnbaum & Leca, 1991).

Individualism as an ideology and foundation of economic and political thinking has been imposed by the modern times. The English classical economists considered that the accomplishment of the individual and his/her interests in the economic life with as few limitations and as limited intervention of the state in the economic life as possible can ensure the individual and collective well-being. They believed that the “invisible hand”, to use Adam Smith’s metaphor, acts for the aggregation of individual interests in view of realizing collective interests. In the political area, individualism has been connected to the citizens’ political participation and respect for human rights. It has also had a crucial role in the continuous democratization of society. This type of individualism imposed by the modern economists and philosophers was named “possessive individualism” by C.B. Macpherson. From his perspective, “society is reduced to an aggregate of free and equal individuals, linked to one another in that they are owners of their abilities and of what these abilities have allowed them to acquire” (Macpherson, 1971).

The utilitarian individualism, with special reference to the one promoted by Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Sociology* (Spencer, 1891) and *The Man Versus the State* (Spencer, 1996), slips towards the theorization of social egoism and towards social Darwinism. The accentuation of the role of the individual, the absolutisation of his/her

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