

Greed

"Greed, for lack of a better word, is good," is the famous dictum Michael Douglas's Gordon Gekko rang out in the 1987 movie *Wallstreet*. This quote encapsulates the spirit that breathes life into the neoliberal paradigm. Greed is the the virtue that fuels the exhaltation of wealth. It is a desire that stirs the hearts of everyone who has expressed the desire to ensure the self's success over other people no matter the cost. Recognition is a social phenomenon where one finds themselves in the parts of them they see in other people. Identity is formed through a fierce rejection of all that is not self, the proclamation of "I am" creates a duality where "I am not" must therefore be true. Recognition turns to othering when there is incongruity, manufactured or otherwise, between self and other. This othering creates a power dynamic that is fuelled by the greed of the in-group. Having where the other lacks can create the justification that the other is lesser than oneself. This hierarchy is presented as natural by the beneficiary of this dynamic. Master ^[1] is said to have made the lives of the enslaved peoples better, Christianity is said to make men out of savages and the benevolence of the wealthy will uplift the poor from their destitution. Chinese feminist Yi-Hen coined the term *nannü* ^[2] which is a description of the first distinction humanity makes with the other. It is the basis for the mismatched relationship between those of different classes, different sexes and different races. Greed is born and bred in the darkness of hierarchy. It

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is the ethos of the owning class. The nation-state is a superstructure that exists to weld together the greed of the few with the needs of the many. To sell its status quo as the best and natural status quo, the nation-state shapes the past in terms that legitimize its existence. Culture, the norms it spawns and the stories told by the individuals who reside within this superstructure are ways by which common sense dictums are forged. These assumptions of how life is experienced are heavily mediated in a top-down fashion so that the state of subjectivity joins the background of thought. Citizenry is upheld as the highest virtue so that life by itself is ordinary but life in that specific nation-state is better by virtue of belonging to this in-group. The collective conscious is soaked in the ideology juice of the owning class; the shape and trajectory of billions of lives warped to the one preplanned by those in charge. The ruling class' success is marketed as the uplifting of everyone else. Their virtues are not glorified; their shout of greed being good is largely frowned at but not condemned. A tolerance for the shadow of greed is undertaken by the masses and when it is broached and the citizens tire of subjectivity their voices are silenced. Greed is neither deified or indicted when its rewards are reaped, it simply has to be. The lie of omission lulls the beneficiary of this invisible greed into blissful ignorance. Greed is very malleable^[3] and the stories told by those who wield its accursed power become the mythology that props up the capitalist mode of existence. It justifies atrocities with precise, scientific calculation or the divine right of the few to the dominion of the many. Its proponents are those with a vested interest in the consolidation of their power.

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Greed, lovelessness and heedless consumption. Hallmarks of the people who quote-unquote “made it”. The American Dream stands as a patriotic call to *something*. Advertisers, the greatest storytellers in a country built on business, manufacture the walkway between dream and reality and dub it the American Way. They fan the flame of desire, embers kindled by the chemical bomb of advertising ideas. The fires of greed are stoked with the gentle prodding of advertisers. A world that is incongruent with the hardship of reality is concocted. One where the American working class took their blue pill dose and woke up in an era of new wealth. A grand harvest of wealth tilled with the blood of the downtrodden. The fruits of the underbelly of the United States bore a sickly sweet taste. The aftertaste of greed that perched itself out of sight and out of mind. Mass consumerism satiated the people enough so that their chains could be adorned with the shiny jewels of a lifestyle they had spent generations they spent building but could not touch. The desire to emulate the glitz and glamor is summarized in the idea that the American proletariat, “see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.” (Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, 2005) This insatiable greed leads to the cannibalization of efforts made to disrupt the paradigm that clips American wings. The dominant class would rather the oppressed have nothing than to cede an inch of their affluence. Any attempt towards equity is met with the recoil of the capitalist. The capitalist’s worst fear is becoming a member of the lower caste and to lose the life and power afforded by their socioeconomic status. Greed drives the legislation that carves states into districts that secure an indefinite stay in the hall of power. It drives forward policy that would sooner see trillions dropped into war

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than investing in the environment. Greed fosters a family of toxicity that poisons a society and points the arrow of progress in the direction of the highest bidder. America has been sold the lie of the benevolent master, the great Leader of the country and in more contemporaneous terms the genius CEO. By worshipping these great Leaders, America will learn that submission to the highest power in the land will provide them the greatest comfort. The glorious Leader of industry will through their own gain give back to the people in some way. The slave master is through great sacrifice giving the savage a taste of the goodness of the Lord, of work ethic and of valuable American values. The election of a new leader of the State will usher in an era of prosperity. The President knows all the answers and the masses have no such knowledge on things. The commoner cannot possibly know how to govern themselves because they do not have the ruthless cunning of the elected officials who through their titles and tutelage have appointed themselves the best at getting constituents to march in line to the polls. The CEO has taken the risk of reaping the benefits of his employees. Their genius outlook on the world has entitled them to the mountain of gold. The measurement of their work is their wealth and that also reflects on everyone below them. The Amazon worker who makes the gold pile climb is merely a cog and not afforded the splendor that the genius CEO has earned through all his work. History is written by the victors. The one-sided American class war has been swept clean by the owning class. In the face of proletarian malaise onset by the owning class' ruthless shut down of any dissent, American greed has grown alongside the republic and wormed its way deep into the unconscious. This embrace of greed as the propellant behind progress has allowed today's neoliberal state of affairs

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to arise. With Leaders of industry touted as the goal to strive for, anything that stands in the way must be struck down. The cult of tradition, of this mythical past of unfettered growth must be the measuring stick for how to bring about the future. The titans of old industry cracked down on unionization by utilizing the big stick method. Their contemporaries lay siege to the understanding of organized labor through the mass media. Played out in a spectacle, the American people are told that the greed of the filthy worker is antithetical to the values of the true patriot. To subvert the will of profit and the economy goes against all that makes the country good is the message broadcast and swallowed by all. The default, supposed apolitical stance is simply the person who has uncritically taken the status quo as natural and unchanging.

Neoliberalism is the ideology that greed has found itself empowering for the last three decades. Its ethos is one that posits that individual freedoms are best realized through the free market. worship of the sanctity of markets is the ideological thrust that propelled liberalization policies. There was the strongly held belief that by letting the financial sector run free, its success would trickle down to the festering masses. This belief was distributed from the top down and its justifications were found through leading economists, philosophers and a political ruling class which needed fresh ideological blood to uphold their rule. This sentiment has a historical echo with Herbert Hoover's worship of the market reaching its logical conclusion in 1929's stock market crash and the subsequent Great Depression. A deep dive into who exactly is having their freedoms realized by the red tide of privatization. Neoliberalism did successfully liberate the burdens of a certain kind of individual. A type of individual whose greed would contort the shape of

history to its terrible, materialist vision of utopia. The 1976 Supreme Court decision to guarantee corporations the right to use unlimited money to fund political campaigns through the 1st amendment was a landmark in the fact that it changed who could be considered an individual and therefore have a fair right to participate in American democracy. Voting with your wallet took on a life of its own. Lobbying in politics is by no means a new thing but by securing the right to speak with the international language of money, corporations could now get to unfettered work in crafting a state that would benefit them. Corporate PACs, which numbered eighty-nine in 1974, had burgeoned to 1,467 by 1982 [5]. *This deregulatory attitude can also be seen in the Citizens United v FEC case which declared a cap on independent expenditures on political campaigns to be against the First Amendment.* The propertied class like it had done at the dawn of the republic sought to create a society in which their rule was natural, that subservience become the natural state of the working class. The Democratic party who had marketed itself off of its wider voting base by giving lip service to civil rights which is tangibly more than can be said about their opposite. A Republican Party which had the “moral majority” reactionary movement, a call to arms for those who saw advancements in the late '70s married in an unholy union with big business' interests. Party lines, campaigns and personalities changed in the parties but their shared interest in protecting property rights, the rights of their business class compatriots to exploit the worker and the continued tyranny of a minority interest group were uncontested truths in the theatre of politics. Neoliberal ideology could cozy itself with both Republican and Democrat administrations. The white middle class who lived with a manufactured fear that the ad-

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vancement of civil rights was an existential threat to their continued existence. An economy that actively worked against the interests of working class people had its problems blamed on other members of the working class. Sociologist Donald Warren dubbed this group of Americans who fiercely rejected both the politics of big business and of the “nanny state” which created “welfare queens” as ‘Middle American Radicals’. I believe this group resembles modern day self identified MAGA. Anecdotally, on the social media app Tik Tok, I saw a distinct rise in ‘Reagan/Bush ’84’ shirts alongside MAGA merch. The present day social relationship created by a globe awash in neoliberal ideology echoes a not so distant past. The modern day alt-right pipeline would not be possible would not be possible if some level of alienation did not exist in these young people’s lives. Just like the MARs of the past, the ire that people feel is channeled horizontally. A vicious opioid addiction brought on by the pathetic regulation of America’s pharmaceutical companies is instead blamed on the drug slinging Mexicans. Wage stagnation and loss of social mobility brought on by labor’s voice being stifled is blamed on other working class people being granted a little less weight on their shoulders. Feminism became a slur online for a lot of young boys who were exposed to rapacious algorithms designed to till engagement farms with the emotions of vulnerable people. One of neoliberalism’s silent philosophical weapons is othering. Hegel’s conception of self-consciousness starts with the rejection of all others outside of self. By defining ‘I’ by what it’s not, the self is created. I believe that this can be applied in a broader sense to the formation of class. Awareness of the classed self has allowed those in the owning class to act on a more unified front. Their collective greed leads them to bat away at obstacles

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which stood in the way of their hedonistic pursuit of wealth. I would like to pause here and acknowledge the anthropomorphizing of classes as a tool of analysis. Individuals make up groups and groups make up individuals. Observation is reflexive and recognition is a key component in the formation of self. That is to say, categorization and grouping does have its limitations when outliers and anomalies are not factored in. Someone with an eye-watering networth and opulence that would make the pharaohs weep might one day reflect on the source of their wealth and the inequality wrought on by a class of people interested in the continued hoarding of it but what use is their individual deliberation if they are not prepared to act to rectify the situation? The fear associated with becoming proletariat dispels this cognitive dissonance and othering can be exemplified anecdotally with how the rich speak about the homeless and evidentially. When wealth or lack thereof is the basis for caste standings, othering creates the classed self that is the lens by which one is perceived. I believe that the self-interest of the business classed self borrowed Markets and those who controlled the capital that blooded them sold the lie of self regulation. Alan Greenspan, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve appointed by Ronald Reagan in 1987 presided over the spread of this belief. New regulation designed to reign in the private sector's now explosive growth would be a violation of the rights of the propertied and so it would not come to pass under Greenspan's watch. Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy helped the former Chairman find solace in market competition. The mouths and murmurs of the hungry would be answered by the unregulated pursuit of self-interest by the banks, finance and multinationals^[6]. The repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in November 1999 happened with the promise that the

present was different and the mountains of the past were receding in the distance. It is a policy that reflects the fervor of the deregulatory spirit and panned out as the beginning of the transformation of banking culture. In his *Vanity Fair* article “Capitalist Fools”, Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz touches on the repeal as a moment that imbued commercial banks with the spirit of speculative investment. Commercial bankers cast aside the moral qualms that come with toying with other people’s money when the temptation of their investment banking counterparts’ returns was answered. The maw of market ideology swallows everything in its path. Healthcare, higher education and housing are introduced to the seedy world of speculative finance. The hypocrisy of neoliberal individualism can be exemplified by the 169% increase in the cost for higher education that exists alongside a measly single digit increase in the wage of young people^[7]. A tool of social mobility that should increase self-determination and therefore the ability to maximize self-interest has been gutted and filled with suits and special interests. Anecdotally, I have heard of teachers working three jobs while juggling the pressures of teaching. At the University of Maryland, the workers are pursuing a \$15 minimum wage while the president of the university nets a six figure paycheck. The costs of coddling suits at the top are shouldered by the student in debt and the teacher in their meager restitution they receive for one of the most important jobs in society. Authority in this society removes the political agency of the festering masses crushed under its boot.

What is absent is the political, the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst the welter of well-financed, highly organized, single-minded interests rabidly seeking governmental favors and overwhelming the practices of representative government and public administration by a sea of cash. (Wolin, 34)^[9]

The abstraction of political will is characteristic of our day and age. It is characteristic of a republic designed with the intention of serving minority interest. Robbing the masses of their ability to enact change leaves them disillusioned. Apathy towards the rigidity of the state is inspired by the continual failure of the political ruling class in responding to the crises brought on by the de facto corporate rule. People learn in school that America's government is for, by and of the people and then a great portion of life is spent with the lived experience that nothing could be further from the truth. Policy is shaped not by people's need but instead by lobbyists, special interest groups and think tanks. The advertisers which continues to sell a fever dream of consumerism are utilized to sell Americans more abstraction, this time their political will goes into the quadrennial two party contest. It is the equivalent of an exhibition game. There is a greed that fuels this bastardization of democracy. The paternalistic view of the people adopted by the political ruling class deems this buffer between people and their political will as a net good. It is the view carried since the birth of the American republic. As C.L.R James puts it in when describing the French Revolution's treatment of the Negro Question, "the bourgeoisie throws over its king

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for a republic quickly enough if thereby it can save its skin and its goods.” (James 122). The nation-state is a tool of bourgeoisie rule.

I see the downside of a society possessed by greed in the conversations I have everyday. When I was 6, I saw the Great Depression. I have mulled over how something that was that big a deal could recede from the collective concious. This rumination of course came with hindsight, I was not six years old and parsing through SEC policy or know about macroeconomics or even why it was so hard to sell a house. I knew that my parents were scared and that put me on edge. I was 10 years old when I saw Trayvon Martin’s face first displayed on my phone. I knew vaguely of the ills of chattel slavery but I didn’t know how George Zimmerman was exonerated. Wasn’t that kind of bad stuff behind us? Now I’m growing older and my voice is dropping and my mom is scared. My parents tell me how to dress and how to act so that I don’t end up like the boys who looks like me on TV. I would be screaming their names no less than 8 years later alongside people who, too, had seen a world where liberty and justice was not for all. By then I knew more. By then I had seen greed roar its ugly head. Greed, to me, existed in the lack of change. Greed was the desire for things to not move forward and to ignore how life molds us all. Watching representatives get on one knee or tweet out the slogans of the people while they increased funding towards the police served to kick the kindling of a fire that had burned inside me for quite a long time. If enough people care, where is the tangible proof? Why aren’t people’s lives getting better underneath the glitz and glammer of so called progress? I’ve talked to plenty of people. I have become very sociable. I have seen what it’s like to be left behind and forgotten. The spectacle

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can pull the wool over your eyes so many times before the games begins to make you feel disillusioned. The scars of greed's battle on the psyche can be seen in how people carry themselves and how they speak about what they do. This is of course is anecdotal but one of the things I hear the most is a relief that someone cares. For the most part, I can only tackle macro issues so the flip side of what I do is listen to the parts of what people are complaining or curious about that resonate with the framework I already have. Not in a, "I'm gonna tune you out", type of deal but there are patterns that are familiar in all the ways that works exists here. From teachers to plumbers to gas station managers, there is a connectedness to us. Some, such as myself, would call it class. I can relate to outlining big picture items for people because they have the same class interests as me. The tragedies of subjugation under capitalism, the state and the unjust hierarchies are fueled by greed. Greed is malleable. It takes on the form of 'national interest' in the case of flattening the individual's of a nation-state into one will. The "more than a corporation" where it is so called radical businesses that will be at the forefront of change is an example of how far greed can shape you. Every iPhone sold is a technological revolution, every Tik Tok trend is siezing the means of attention production and ethical investing means that even the Yuppie of yesteryear can be an American revolutionist. We are in the information era and we are less informed. We are rebels with sponsors and brands to promote. For me the peak of that either has to be advertisements where there are advertisements for joining the military dressed in this video game like aesthetic. The commercial says in a world lacking meaning and which will leave this generation behind, only in conscription is the cure to alienation. There is another one where the

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main focus was the fact that a woman both has a wife and is in the army. It is disgusting to me that the US Military apparatus can go into schools to recruit and they can try and recruit through advertisements. From 2008, the bailout of the banks meant that working class people were still feeling the hurt until the pandemic where money was redistributed upwards once again. It is ridiculous. It is astounding that those at the bottom of the economic caste, of which there are many, are kept at poverty wages. The historical trend to me, a cynic, is that even when things got marginally better the structure that had led it to deterioration remained more or less the same. Greed has led us where we are.

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