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A Self-Devouring System: A Theological Critique of Capitalism

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Abstract. According to Max Weber's famous thesis, Protestant ethics was one of the key driving forces behind the emergence of modern capitalism. Does this mean, however, that the capitalist economic and social order can be theologically justified? The author argues that it cannot; indeed, capitalism may rather be understood as a consequence of sin. Its defining features are the demand for continuous growth and the economic exploitation of human desire — in other words, capitalism builds the Tower of Babel. By contrast, the biblical order of the Sabbath foregrounds the practices of rest, self-limitation, and creaturely freedom, thereby calling into question the absolutization of production and consumption.

Keywords: capitalism; Protestant ethic; economic growth; desire; theological anthropology; creaturely finitude; cannibal capitalism; Sabbath; self-limitation; crisis

Finite World, Infinite Desire

It is hardly necessary today to persuade anyone that our world is in crisis. Many sense the fractures in the economic and social order; they see natural resources being depleted, inequalities widening, and human life becoming increasingly vulnerable. Yet most responses still attempt to cover these cracks with little more than a cosmetic patch. We place our hopes in more efficient technologies, more responsible consumption, stricter regulation, or somewhat fairer distribution, while rarely questioning the system that repeatedly generates these problems. It is therefore worth digging deeper and examining the foundations of capitalism from a theological per-

spective as well: what conception of the human person underlies it, how does it shape our desires, and what ultimate promise does it offer? Honest confrontation does not in itself provide a ready-made solution, but it creates the possibility of recognising the nature of the disease rather than merely treating its symptoms, and of beginning the search for genuine alternatives. Honest confrontation does not in itself provide a ready-made solution, but it creates the possibility of recognising the nature of the disease rather than merely treating its symptoms, and of beginning the search for genuine alternatives.

It is sometimes said, not without a hint of malice, that capitalism and Protestantism are close relatives.

The charge is not entirely unfounded, although the relationship is considerably more nuanced than such a claim suggests. In his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber does not argue that the Reformation invented capitalism; rather, he shows how the Protestant ethic of vocation, inner-worldly asceticism, disciplined labour, thrift, and the reinvestment of profit contributed to the social habitus in which modern capitalism could take root and grow.[1] The historical relationship, however, does not constitute theological legitimation. Precisely as Protestants, we may question capitalism's hegemonic position, because according to our faith no economic system can become an ultimate standard. The market may be a useful instrument, but it does not operate like divine providence; growth may be good, but not exclusively in material terms; and profit, under certain conditions, may be a legitimate aim of an enterprise, but it is not evidence of God's blessing.

According to a widely accepted economic definition, capitalism is an economic and social system in which most of the means of production are privately owned, economic actors make decisions on the basis of their own interests and profit-seeking objectives, and prices, incomes, and resources are allocated largely by the market – that is, through the interaction of supply, demand, and competition – rather than by central state planning.[2] In this view, the principal institutions of capitalism are private property, the profit motive, market competition, freedom of choice for consumers and entrepreneurs, and the conviction that the pursuit of individual self-interest can ultimately generate economic growth, prosperity, and social order. The economist and sociologist Zoltán Pogátsa goes further: in his view, these features are not in themselves sufficient to define capitalism, since they existed before capitalism as well. The system's true distinguishing characteristic is the imperative of continuous growth; the entire capitalist order is built upon it.[3]

[1] Weber, Max: *A protestáns etika és a kapitalizmus szelleme*, Ford. Ábrahám Zoltán, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2020.

[2] Jahan, Sarwat – Mahmud, Ahmed Saber: *„What Is Capitalism?"*, Finance & Development, 52/2, 2015.

[3] Pogátsa Zoltán: *Fenntartható gazdaság vagy társadalmi összeomlás*, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2023, 80–81.

At first sight, these appear to be sober, almost neutral definitions. Human beings work, undertake enterprises, assume risks, produce, and consume, while individual decisions are coordinated – in Adam Smith's famous metaphor – by the market's "invisible hand."

The theological question, however, is not whether all this can function, but what conception of humanity it presupposes. One of capitalism's most powerful driving forces is human desire. This is not merely need, or the securing of the basic conditions of life, but the restless striving that wants more even of what is already sufficient. The system does not seek to discipline this desire – as the Christian tradition taught for many centuries – but converts it into demand, multiplies it, and builds economic growth upon it.

It does not merely buy and sell products; it exploits the dissatisfaction that is fundamentally present within the human condition, because only those who repeatedly experience a lack will repeatedly purchase. As Christopher Lasch observed, advertising manufactures "a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored."[4]

At precisely this point, the narrative of the Fall reveals the anthropological depth upon which capitalism also draws. Human beings do not fall into sin because actual necessity compels them; this is no offence committed out of material necessity. The Garden of Eden is a place of abundance, and God gives humanity every tree but one. Yet temptation suggests that this single boundary renders the whole created order intolerable. "You will be like God," the serpent says (Gen. 3:5): it offers not simply fruit, but limitlessness, infinity, and self-deification. The tragedy is not that human beings desire, but that desire becomes severed from gratitude, trust, and their creaturely place. According to Augustine, the human heart remains restless until it rests in God; when openness to the infinite is not directed towards God, however, human beings begin to invest finite things with infinitude. They expect unlimited security from money, complete fulfilment from consumption, salvation from technology, and an infinite future from growth.[5] The Bible's other ancient narrative, the Tower of Babel, presents the same motif on a social scale.

"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens," the people say (Gen. 11:4). Building is not sinful in itself, any more than labour, commerce, or material advancement. Yet the tower becomes a symbol of the loss of human measure: humanity is no longer content with the place allotted to it within creation, but attempts to break through creaturely limits, make a name for itself, and secure its own permanence in history. Classical theology, by contrast, regards infinity as an attribute of God. According to Thomas Aquinas's distinction, God alone is infinite by virtue of his very essence; the being of every creature is received, bounded, and dependent.[6] A limit, therefore, is not a defect in creation but part of its order.

[4] Lasch, Christopher: *Az önimádat társadalma*, Európa Könyvkiadó, 1984. 93. o.
[5] Augustinus: *Vallomások*, I,1.
[6] Aquinói Tamás: *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 7, a. 1–2.

Human beings do not become complete by abolishing their limits, but by accepting them before God and learning to inhabit them well.

Capitalism, by contrast, promises an immanent infinity. It treats continuous growth as a necessity to which society, politics, human time, and ultimately nature itself must conform. Yet infinite growth is impossible in a finite world. Arable land, drinking water, mineral resources, energy sources, the regenerative capacity of ecosystems, and even the endurance of the human body, attention, and nervous system are all limited. As early as 1972, the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* examined how the growth of population, industrial production, food production, pollution, and the consumption of non-renewable resources collide on a finite planet.[7] The report did not offer a prediction tied to a single date, but a systemic warning: unlimited expansion may lead to overshoot and decline unless humanity changes course.

This is why Nancy Fraser describes capitalism as cannibalistic. The system does not merely extract profit from labour; it also consumes the background conditions of its own survival: nature, care, communities, and democratic institutions.[8] It devours everything it can reach and returns it as a commodity or resource. Rest becomes a recreation industry, art becomes entertainment, attention becomes data, relationships become network value, nature becomes raw material, and the human body becomes performance. Capitalism is almost incapable of self-limitation, because stopping – or even slowing down – counts as a crisis within its own mode of operation. The absence of growth destabilises the expectations that keep the entire system in motion. Capitalism therefore does not merely use human desire; it institutionalises the inability to say "enough." Unless it encounters external and internal limits, it will sooner or later collide with the physical boundaries it is ideologically unwilling to acknowledge. In this sense, collapse is not an apocalyptic prediction attached to an arbitrarily chosen date, but the endpoint of a system logic that demands unlimited expansion on finite foundations.

One of the Bible's most radical responses to this logic is the Sabbath. The Sabbath sanctifies non-action: it declares that the world will not collapse if, for one day, human beings neither produce nor purchase nor increase their market performance. Walter Brueggemann therefore calls the Sabbath an act of resistance to the pharaonic economy, in which there is no rest because ever more bricks are always required.[9] The Sabbath interrupts the cycle of production and consumption and restores creaturely freedom to the human person. Within the Sabbath order, the human being, the servant, the stranger, and the animal may all rest; in the sabbatical year, even the land itself is granted rest (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15; Lev. 25:1-7).

[7] Meadows, Donella H. – Meadows, Dennis L. – Randers, Jørgen – Behrens, William W.: *The Limits to Growth*, New York, Universe Books, 1972.

[8] Fraser, Nancy: *Kannibál kapitalizmus*, Budapest, Open Books, 2024, különösen 46–50.

[9] Brueggemann, Walter: *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

The Sabbath is not an economic programme but a theological rebellion: it reminds us that the world is not sustained by our performance and that our worth does not depend on how much we produce.

At present, there is no global social alternative to capitalism ready to take its place. This, however, does not render theological critique superfluous. On the contrary, it is precisely now that we must learn to speak differently about work, growth, property, sufficiency, and the good life. The aim is not to draft an ecclesiastical economic plan, but to ensure that, when the signs of collapse become visible, we possess a language with which to offer consolation and orientation. We must be able to say that human worth is not determined by market performance, that less is not necessarily failure, that rest is not uselessness, that finitude is not a source of shame, and that the future of life does not depend on unlimited growth. Even if certain forms of Protestant ethos historically contributed to the emergence of the spirit of capitalism, the gospel requires us to declare that this spirit is not identical with the Spirit of God. Infinity belongs to God. We, for our part, must finally learn to be gratefully human.