

The Failure of Capitalism and Totalitarianism in Yevgeny Zamyatin's Novel We

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Abstract

The question of what the key to happiness is has been discussed throughout the centuries in hope of finding a decisive answer: however, the human intellect differs from one to another and as a result, many theories have been coined and implemented through the history of mankind. One of those theories is the theory of Capitalism which aims at providing an adequate amount of products or services to the masses in order to satisfy the human needs in order to result in happiness. However, Capitalism has been under criticism for only providing satisfaction to the financially capable citizens of society, and the poor cannot attain that feeling of happiness. Also, the human desire cannot be tamed and limited to certain demands because humans are eager and greedy by nature. Another theory is Totalitarianism which aims at complete submission to government in hope for providing all life necessities and complements to the citizens of society, and those citizens do certain tasks or jobs in order to be eligible to gain benefits at the expense of losing their humane needs and desires. Each person is dealt with and provided to as equal as the other. Hence, while Capitalism works on harnessing and embracing the human desires for the need of satisfaction as well as creating new jobs to fulfill newly surfacing desires, Totalitarianism, on the other hand, aims thoroughly at repressing those desires. In Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel "We", Totalitarianism is used to neutralize any human features in the citizens. However, both of the systems fail to achieve their ultimate goal: happiness. The aim of this study is to compare and contrast Capitalism and Totalitarianism in Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel "We" in the light of achieving happiness, and how both of the systems fail in doing so.

Keywords: Totalitarianism, Capitalism, desire, happiness

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN'IN 'BİZ' ESERİNDEKİ KAPİTALİZM VE ERKTEKELCİLİĞİN KIYASLAMASI

ÖZ

Mutluluğa giden yolun ne olduğu sorusu, düzgün bir cevap bulma umuduyla yüzyıllardan beri tartışılmaktadır: Ancak, insane zekası birbirine göre farklılık göstermektedir ve sonuç olarak, insane ırkının tarihi boyunca birçok teori ortaya atılmış ve geliştirilmiştir. Bu teorilerden biri de mutluluk sağlamak için insane ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak amacıyla kitlelere, gerekli olan ürün ve hizmeti sağlamayı hedefleyen Kapitalizmdir. Ancak, Kapitalizm, yalnızca toplumun finansal olarak yetkin bireylerine tatmin sağladığı için eleştiri altındadır ve yoksul kesim bu mutluluk hissiyatından yoksundur. Ayrıca, insane arzusu evcilleştirilemez ve belli başlı arzularla sınırlandırılmaz, çünkü insanlar, doğası gereği, istekli ve aç gözlüdür. Diğer bir teori ise, gerekli tüm yaşamsal gereklilikleri sağlamak adına, ipleri toplumun vatandaşlarına ve hükümete vermeyi hedefleyen Erktekelciliktir. Ve bu vatandaşlar, bazı görev ve meslekleri, insane ihtiyaç ve arzularını yitirerek yerine getirmektedir. Dolayısıyla, Kapitalizm, ortaya çıkan istekleri karşılamak amacıyla oluşan yeni meslekleri ortaya çıkarmakla beraber, tatmin ihtiyacını karşılamak için insane arzularını kucaklayan ve benimseyen bir fikir barındırırken, Erktekelcilik, bunun aksine, bu arzuları bastırmaya yönelik bir fikir benimser. Yevgeny Zamyatin'in "Biz" romanında, Erktekelcilik, vatandaşlar üzerinde, insane özellikleri etkisizleştirmek için kullanılmıştır. Ancak, mutluluğa giden amaca ulaşmakta başarısız olmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Yevgeny Zamyatin'in "Biz" romanında, mutluluğa ulaşmanın, ve her iki teorinin de bunda nasıl başarısız olduğunu kıyaslamak ve karşılaştırma yapmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Erktekelcilik, Kapitalizm, arzu, mutluluk

1. Introduction

The term Capitalism can be defined as “the sector of an economy in which markets determine prices and quantities” (Foldvary, Capitalism Defined and Explained 2015). In capitalist societies, the system harnesses and embraces human desires. It makes sure that resources are used adequately to manufacture products in accordance with people’s needs. When those needs are gratified, then some desires cease to exist. However, after the satisfaction of certain desires has been accomplished, new ones surface and call for new requirements to be met. Such requirements lead to the creation of new jobs and then better social and economic statuses which lead to what can be considered as temporary happiness. This feeling of temporary happiness is what prompts people to continue striving even though this happiness is only connected to their human nature of wanting and desiring things, so it can be called inauthentic happiness. Happiness can be defined as “the result of the pursuit and attainment of life purpose, meaning, challenge, and personal growth; happiness is based on reaching one’s full potential and operating at full functioning” (AIPC, 2011). On the other hand, Totalitarianism also seeks the achievement and attainment of happiness. Totalitarianism can be simply defined as the following:

“Totalitarianism is a form of government that attempts to assert total control over the lives of its citizens. It is characterized by strong central rule that attempts to control and direct all aspects of individual life through coercion and repression. It does not permit individual freedom. Traditional social institutions and organizations are discouraged and suppressed,

making people more willing to be merged into a single unified movement. Totalitarian states typically pursue a special goal to the exclusion of all others, with all resources directed toward its attainment, regardless of the cost” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019)

‘We’ is a dystopian novel by Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, written 1920–1921 (Brown 1921). The novel was first published as an English translation by Gregory Zilboorg in 1924 by E. P. Dutton in New York. The novel describes a world of harmony and conformity within a united totalitarian state named OneState. The novel’s time setting is in the future when D-503 who is a spacecraft engineer lives in this state which is considered to be an urban city constructed mostly of glass to ease the government’s job of observing its civilians. The civilians are well-programmed by the government to the point where they all step together while walking and all wear the same uniform. There is no other way other than numbers to refer to the citizens. The society is so strict that it is run by logic or reason as the primary and ultimate justification for the law and rules for the society. John Hoyles (1991) described the civilians as follows: “The individual's behaviour is based on logic by way of formulas and equations outlined by the One State.” In Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel ‘We’, the Totalitarian system in OneState solely aims at providing absolute happiness to the people by neutralizing their human nature and mechanizing them. By eliminating their human identities, the system expects the citizens’ desires to be reduced, restricted, and managed at the same time; hence, it’s easier to control and satisfy them without the surface of new ones which would be problematic to the authority. However, some of the citizens such as I-330 and S-4711 are not satisfied with this totalitarian system and revolt for a change, for it doesn’t provide them with the happiness they were promised. Other characters start developing emotions and passion like U who has fallen in love with D-503, and O-90 wanting to get pregnant and have a baby which is against the law. This study will show how both of the governing systems are unsuccessful in providing happiness to their citizens.

2. Discussion

Happiness is a concept that is unassociated with freedom according to OneState’s totalitarian regime. For this reason, all the citizens are deprived from their freedom which means the regime has a total control over their lives. It’s seen in the fact that their apartments have glass walls to make it easier for surveillance and the lack of choice when it comes to their personal lives such as using their imagination, having emotions which is considered to be a sickness, or having a child. However, the totalitarian system imposes this way of life on its citizens to assure them absolute happiness because having such animalistic desires will only cause stress and pain. So, the only way to sustain pure happiness is to eliminate humane emotions and desires for the greater good. The regime also did the impossible to dominate hunger by fighting a war that lasted two hundred years after which only two tenths of the population of the world survived. “Consequently, to dominate the world, man had to win a victory over hunger after paying a very high price. I refer to the great Two Hundred Years’ War, the war between the city and the land” (Zamyatin 21).

On the other hand, capitalist societies give absolute freedom of choice to their citizens. Those choices are completely based on human feelings and individual desires. Through the gratification of those needs and desires, new ones emerge on the surface and require gratification as well. As a result, new products and services are invented through innovation

and competition to meet those needs. In Ludwig von Mises's (1881-1973) famous treatise on economics, *Human Action* (1966), he explains:

"The pricing process is a social process. It is consummated by an interaction of all members of the society. All collaborate and cooperate, each in the particular role he has chosen for himself in the framework of the division of labor. Competing in cooperation and cooperating in competition all people are instrumental in bringing about the result, viz., the price structure of the market, the allocation of the factors of production to the various lines of want-satisfaction, and the determination of the share of each individual" (von Mises, 1966:117).

Thus, a capitalist government has a limited role in the happiness of the people. Therefore, it's the people's responsibility to satisfy themselves and create their own happiness opposed to the life style of OneState's citizens who are entirely dependent on their totalitarian regime which saves them the trouble of having those needs and desires in the first place by eliminating some of them and providing a solution to what is left.

The citizens' happiness stems out of their trust in the Benefactor in OneState because he is indeed playing the role of God by turning the society into Garden of Eden. "We returned to the simple-mindedness and innocence of Adam and Eve. No more meddling with good and evil and all that; everything is Simple again, heavenly, childishly simple!" (Zamyatin 59). He has turned people innocent of any corrupting knowledge that may lead them to decay, and obligated them to be subordinate to him as their God. He also states that, "we serve our rational god, whom we most know thoroughly...our god gives us absolute truth-that is, he has rid us of any kind of doubt" (Zamyatin 43). So, it's clear that the Benefactor with his totalitarian system of governing has turned the society not only to a utopian one but also to a heaven-like society where none of the residents has to worry about how to achieve happiness because every little aspect that contributes to making them happy is provided by this divine regime.

On the contrary, a reader can fathom is that the OneState society is not perfect because complete freedom does not mean complete happiness, nor does complete happiness create a utopian society that the Benefactor is after. Throughout the novel, Zamyatin uses literary allusions such as integrating the Bible to make strong connections between OneState and the story of Adam and Eve. The author draws a picture of the similarity of both words where abiding the laws and rules of the governor will ultimately result in complete happiness and satisfaction of the residents/citizens. Thus, the simile of depicting OneState as the Garden of Eden emphasizes the role of the Benefactor as the almighty God and the main characters I-330 as Eve and D-503 as Adam who sin by disobeying the law. Furthermore, S-4711 is shown to resemble the Serpent who told Eve to eat the forbidden apple.

When it comes to Capitalism, realism prevails because not everyone has the same needs or desires. Every single person in the society has their own identity and character which means different tendencies; thus, different people find their happiness in different desires. By considering such differences, a capitalist government starts investing in scientific researches to prompt innovation as well as the development that will result in newer products and services that will gratify those diverse desires of different people and, as a result, will achieve satisfaction and total happiness of a larger number of people.

As much as Totalitarianism and Capitalism seem as successful governing systems when it comes to achieving happiness, they both actually fail in doing so. In OneState, not everybody is happy. Some of the characters are not content with their status as mechanized beings. For example, O-90 longs for having child of her own without the intervention of the government. Also, I-330 is eager to start a revolution to change the way people are living in OneState as she believes there is no final revolution, and things end up drastically changing after a long period of time for the betterment of the people which will eventually give their life a meaning as human beings. Therefore, Totalitarianism in OneState doesn't actually make it Garden of Eden, neither does it provide happiness to all citizens. Similarly, Capitalism doesn't do a better job at it either. It causes a society to be divided into two classes: the high class and the low class. As humans are known to be ambitious, they tend to strive to acquire better life conditions and accessories; however, under the ruling system of capitalism, the lower class, which is the majority of people most of the time, cannot obtain certain products or services due to their expensive prices which make them exclusive only for the rich. As a result, their inability to obtain what they desire for, as desires have no ending (the same also for revolutions), results in the failure of the system to sustain the claimed happiness.

3. Conclusion

To conclude with, neither Totalitarianism nor Capitalism is successful in the endeavor of achieving happiness. One system tries to eliminate human features like desires, emotions, and imagination for the sake of mechanizing people and turning them in to robots programmed to be pleased with a press of a button. Moreover, Zamyatin's attempt to make such a significant simile between OneState and the Garden of Eden fails to do the Garden justice because the Benefactor in his State has failed to make the citizens happy, unlike the Garden where ultimate happiness exists. As a result, human-made theories or ideologies will always have flaws in them because we, humans, are not as perfect as God's creation. Furthermore, the deadly sin of greed and the lust for power ruins the achievement of the Benefactor's goal i.e. happiness because, as humane features exist in the citizens as well, the citizens may have feelings of jealousy toward the social, economical and intellectual status of the Benefactor: thus, reducing the chances of achieving that happiness. On the other hand, Capitalism satisfies only all of the wealthy class' desires, but at the same time gives temporary happiness to the lower class by exploiting their regenerating desires and needs and deliver them on a gold plate to the privileged ones. Moreover, the inhuman treatment and dehumanizing the citizens in the OneState make the citizens act and like robots and imagine themselves as animals who only satisfy their basic and instinctive needs without any regard to human values or morals. Furthermore, keeping the citizens in the zone of misinformation or lack of knowledge results in the abuse of the government toward the citizens where most of their freedom is stolen and intellectual properties have no value. As a result, complete violation of their rights and theft of their possible properties are stolen by the government and, instead, given to the governor to enjoy. All in all, I think that both of the political systems utterly fail in achieving the concept of happiness to citizens, and the endeavors of mis-conceptualizing happiness would never succeed because the human brain with its morals and humane values contradict with the life style of animals or programmed robots.

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