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Howells vs. Capitalism

by Michael Wendt

(History 1140)

In *A Traveler from Altruria*, author William Dean Howells utilized a fictional story to criticize the American way of life at the end of the 19th century. In this story, Howells realistically described the working and living conditions of the 1890s. His goal was to paint a grim condition of society so that his readers would be influenced to change it. One of his main premises was that unrestrained capitalism created many negative results for American society, such as the ignorance of aesthetic beauty, corruption of the rich, and lowered quality of life for the working class. To fix these problems, he laid out a general proposal to create a socialist utopia. He illustrated his belief in the story by creating a fictional character from the socialist utopia of Altruria. This person traveled to America and observed the consequences of unrestrained capitalism in the late 19th century.

Howells' account described what Mark Twain called the "Gilded Age" of American history. This era spanned from the post civil war period to the beginning of the 20th century (Tindall, 819). The term "gilded" referred to an object that has a gold covering, but underneath it was worthless material. During this age there was an explosion of industrialism which created a demand for factory labor. Country farmers and impoverished immigrants began flowing into the cities to work in the factories and in other types of industrial labor. Although these actions were responsible for transforming the country into an economic power, it also created harsh working conditions for workers. The United States government allowed business leaders to practice laissez-faire capitalism, which is the idea that business should be permitted to take any steps necessary to be financially successful. Howells' premise was that the downside to the Gilded Age was caused by laissez-faire capitalism. As previously mentioned, he asserted that unrestrained capitalism places emphasis on industrialism over aesthetics, caused greed and corruption, and ultimately lowers the quality of life for the majority Americans to favor a small minority.

Howells believed that laissez-faire capitalism damaged aesthetical beauty. In his story, when the Altrurian traveled through the country, the character noted how the environment was damaged, particularly the ugly scene left by the deforestation. One of the residents of the town explained to him that the land owner of the forest was compelled to chop it down to pay for his debts (Howells, 39-40). In another example, the story highlights the reality that those who wished to become artists or novelist would have difficulty making money. Although some people out of a love for artistry would go into those professions, others would be deterred from it due to financial issues (Howells, 67). Throughout the story, the Altrurian was horrified that people had to make such aesthetical sacrifices for the sake of money. He asserted that people have basically become a slave to capitalism, and as a result they lowered their interest in beauty.

One of the reasons that Howells had a major distaste for laissez-faire capitalism was that it could corrupt the leaders of industry. During the Gilded Age, some of the most successful entrepreneurs were called "robber barons." These were primarily railroad executives who engaged in greedy financial practices. One of the most distinguished robber barons was Jay Gould who scammed people into buying worthless railroads and used corporate earnings for "personal investment and judicious bribes" (Tindall, 750). Unfortunately, he was responsible for decimating many business enterprises. Most railroad executives made their fortunes by engaging in similar practices to those of Jay Gould. These types of practices went to the heart of Howells' disdain for capitalism. In the story, the Altrurian felt that it was wrong for one person to rise above another, especially if it was through

exploitation (Howells, 40).

During one of the conversations with the representatives of the upper class, the Altrurian was horrified to learn that one of the ways that business leaders pushed their agenda was through buying votes in public elections. Even though the lower class may have desired to improve their status through public elections, they would sell their votes. Behind these actions was the desperation of the lower class who required the money to live (Howells, 112-113). This highlighted one of the results of laissez-faire capitalism, which was greed and corruption of robber barons. Unfortunately, those who sold their votes would not be much better off and continued to live a difficult lifestyle.

Another reason why Howells was against laissez-faire capitalism was that he believed that it created a rift between the rich and the poor. According to Howells, this division would allow the smaller number of upper class business men to control the masses. This would result in the masses living for themselves rather than humanity (Howells, 99). One of the tactics that a banker employed would be to charge high rates of interest on farmers' mortgages and thus put them in serious debt. They then would be effectively condemned to continuously work to pay it off. Howells contended that it placed them in a hopeless condition (Howells, 91). He believed that it essentially created a false mindset among the lower class that this was the only way they could realistically live. As one farmer in the story said, "poor people must always live that way or they could not have lived at all" (Howells, 99). In these types situations the lower class would be unlikely to enjoy the same pleasures as the upper class.

Near the end of the book, the Altrurian gave a speech to an assembly of people which included all the classes. In his presentation he elaborated on how Altruria solved the problems generated by laissez-faire capitalism. The Altrurians basically created a socialist utopia where all its residents had economic equality. Howells had been implying throughout the story that economic equality was the key to breaking-down all of the social rifts. Economic equality was achieved in Altruria by abolishing the monetary system. Its citizens were free to pursue what they please, because they were no longer condemned to work for money (Howells, 149). This socialist system was supposed to ensure that no person rose above another because it forbade competition (Howells, 155). Another method that Altruria used to eliminate capitalism was to abandon the cities which allowed the previously poor to live in better homes in the country (Howells, 151), however; it was not clear whether or not these residences were considered to be the property of those who live in them. Although this issue was not addressed, overall, the general attitude of the story was that there was no ownership of anything in Altruria and that its citizens lived happy modest lives.

In order to provide for the basic necessities of life such as food, water, clothes, public utilities, etc, all of Altruria's citizens were required to do a few hours of manual labor each day (Howells, 155). Since the citizens were required to do little work, they were free to develop the more cultural aspects of society. Many citizens spent their free time pursuing artistic and literary enterprises. It was not clear from this account how people were assigned to do manual labor, Howells never resolved this question beyond the assertion that people did what needed to be done without complaining. Overall, it appeared that the basis for economic equality through the abolishment of money rested on the assumption that people would realistically want it. Howells' premise was that if people wanted an Altruria, they could achieve it by believing in it rather than capitalism and competition.

In conclusion, Howells, a progressive and socialist writer, created *A Traveler from Altruria* with the purpose of criticizing capitalism in the Gilded Age. The type of capitalism he critiqued was laissez-faire. This was where business engaged in dubious practices, which would probably be considered illegal today. He contended that laissez-faire capitalism detracted from aesthetic beauty, brought greed and corruption, and damaged the lower class in favor of the rich. Howells also provided a basic outline for a socialist utopia. He believed the problems of capitalism would fade away through economic equality. This type of equality could only be achieved through the

abolishment of money. However, this idea rested on the contention that people could lose their faith in a system where one worked to make money. Although Howells' ideas may sound pleasant on paper, society has not yet proved its possibility.

Works Cited

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