

Martin Buber and Capitalism.

Alex Manning

Buber, in I and Thou, demonstrates to us that modern capitalism is a force propelling our society along a trajectory necessitated by its carnivorous it-desire. Furthermore, Buber maintains that although our perception is that we guide capitalism, *the reality is that capitalism in fact guides us*. Buber remarks that, "They [modern leaders] tell you that they have adjusted the apparatus to modern conditions; but you notice that henceforth they can only adjust themselves to the apparatus, as long as that permits it." [97] This capitalistic momentum, Buber argues, has contributed to the expansion of the It-world overwhelming the You-world, "the despotism of the proliferating It." [97] Capitalism, in the opinion of Buber, is like a great iron ball chained with heavy sculpted links to our feet residing on the top of a hill. Although we have the choice to get this ball rolling, once rolling the ball necessitates our following.

Buber's description in this case seems more lyrical and inspirational than explanatory (which is not a negative criticism) behind his claim, have concrete insights into why capitalism operates in this way. Some persuasive explanations I can think of to explain this momentum are: (1) capitalism, through such activities as *advertisement and education*, enculturates the populace within which it operates into its style of growth and ideology and thus it becomes a self propelling force. (2) once a society embarks upon capitalism, those members of the society who entertain the idea of jumping ship are forced to confront an almost certain economically harsh situation in that in order to buy material needs one must have money and without a job one does not readily possess money. These possibilities take purchase on capitalism once it has gotten moving, because while one is making the choice towards capitalism one is not yet under its influence, economically or ideologically.

EEK!

is A a zero-sum game?

Buber, in his attempt to combat this growing It-world, seems to suggest that although we as a modern collective are caught within capitalism, once we realize the harms such a form of being necessitates to our conceptions of ourselves as humans, *we can and will shed this mentality*. He writes:

It is a descent through the spirals of the spiritual underworld but could also be called an ascent to the innermost, subtlest, most intricate turn that knows no Beyond and even less any Backward but only the unheard turn - *the breakthrough*. Shall we have to follow this path all the way to the end, to the test of the final darkness? But where there is danger what saves grows, too." [104-105]

I think, all in all, this is a very interesting, insightful account characterizing our being in the modern world.

A broad path, but nearly done.