

Process-Centered Love: Dismantling Capitalist Logic in Our Relationships

By Lee Cicuta

The Logic of Capitalism

The anti-capitalists of today look back at the most important works of anti-capitalists of yesterday (or the last century) and find a similar flaw threaded through many of the otherwise clear and continuously relevant writings: many of them believed that capitalism's end was nigh and inevitable. They thought its strength was in its oppressive power, and that eventually that rigid, oppressive power would be unable to hold its form and collapse. What they did not account for — and what we recognize now — is that capitalism has an uncanny ability to adapt. Its incredible staying power lies not within its oppressive power alone, but in its ability to make so many of us foot soldiers in the very system that undermines our interests, poisons our communities, and makes our relationships untenable. Capitalism maintains, not just because there are rich and powerful who enforce it, but also because the rest of us have internalized its logic and march to its beat in our everyday lives. That capitalist logic is this: to live always on the promise of the future satisfaction of desire. We not only enact this logic in the arenas typically understood as the realm of capitalist logic (workplaces, electoral politics, etc.) but also in our most intimate relationships, and that is the arena I will be delving into here.

To be human is to live with an intrinsic sense of loss. The loss we must grapple with is not only the reality that our lives, and the lives of the ones we love, are finite, but also the loss that comes with living in a universe we do not — and cannot — fully understand. In that sense of loss there is a great potential of creation — art, games, community, faith, philosophy — but to connect with that potential also means acceptance and coming to terms with loss. There is likely very little that is more difficult and more painful than a reckoning with loss (and arguably very little that is more rewarding or fulfilling than doing so.)

The reality of this intrinsic human sense of loss comes to bear in many ways, but few quite so clear as in our ability to signify (create language, name things.) When we name an object we create something bigger than the object itself and can never be truly satisfied by it, and our desire for an object hinges on our very inability to be satisfied by it. Our signifiers are endless, abstract, and unlocalized, and the objects they signify have a finitude, and in the bridgeless space between is both our sense of loss and our desire.

The logic of capitalism sees that loss — the gap between true reality and our meant reality — that we feel and offers to fill that void, to avoid that pain of loss, by consuming. There is always another product on the horizon that promises the ultimate satisfaction and end to loss. We will find that the newest iPhone doesn't satisfy us the way we expected or hoped, it is not the perfect object we seek, but don't worry, the next iPhone might just see to all your heart's desires after all. We all know, whether consciously or unconsciously, the paradox built into this logic. Even were it possible to truly provide that ultimate, complete satisfaction, capitalism could not deliver it

because doing so would spell the end of capitalism and consumption itself. It's a promise capitalism cannot ever deliver on.

However, it still plants the seeds of its logic in our minds: the possibility to the end of loss, of pain, of want. But it's always just over the horizon. Our satisfaction — our freedom from desire — is always somewhere just beyond us, but feels tantalizingly close. The promise of a better future. It is this logic that anticapitalists often still find ourselves trapped within, despite our knowledge of capitalism's larger workings, and it shows up in our philosophy, too. When we promise a better future (ultimate satisfaction) under our ideal anticapitalist blueprints, we make that promise the mode of our resistance and we step into capitalism's own playing field. Liberation becomes not something that we can actionably take here and now, power isn't something we can take accountability for in our lives today, but is just over the horizon.

Outcome Focused Relationships

While we can find instances of this logic in all arenas of struggle, here we are going to speak of how it expresses itself in our close and intimate relationships. Many of us are raised to understand relationships as possibilities for fantasy fulfillment (“I will be so happy when I find a person I love and then marry them and then buy a house and then have kids and then raise those kids and then and then and then...”) We can often get so caught up in the fantasies of our future lives, and the obsession with trying to make others fit into that prefabricated mold, that we miss the reality of one another entirely. What becomes especially sticky about internalizing this capitalist logic is that we become dependent on it for our sense of happiness. Even in the near impossible circumstance that you do get exactly the life that you've always fantasized about, it cannot bring you satisfaction for the simple reason that you've only ever known how to place your happiness in a place just over the horizon, not where you're standing.

Moreover, this logic leads us to place others in the roll of our personal wish fulfillers, rather than the autonomous people that they are. We engage in this mode of thinking when we get wrapped up in working towards whatever future steps we think we want to have in our relationships for them to be meaningful, and in doing so we inevitably miss the most meaningful thing relationships have to offer: the real, unique, full human beings that want to stand beside us. When we keep our eyes on future (and truly unknowable) outcomes, we miss the richness of the process in the present. We miss getting to watch people we care about growing into themselves. We get caught up in the fear-based response of trying to control that growth that we miss the joys of supporting it instead.

Viewing and treating the people we're in relationship with as conduits for our fantasy fulfillment denies them respect for the fullness of their humanity, and objectifies them. We place part of their value not in the present, but in their ability to promise us future — always future — satisfaction. Conforming to the paradoxical logic of capitalism, it is also a promise that no one can keep. As an example: if what we value in a relationship is that it lasts for a lifetime (avoiding the pain of loss), then satisfaction can only truly be achieved at the moment of someone's death, the full delivery of that promise. Yet, who among us, standing at the grave of a beloved one,

would say that the most meaningful aspect of that relationship was the completion of a contract rather than the special and unique spirit that person in themselves brought into our lives? Further, even that contract can protect us from loss for only a finite time: as anyone who has experienced the profound loss that is the death of a loved one can attest.

Section end-note: Think back to a fantasy for your future life that you had three, five, ten years ago. Did it happen exactly the way you wanted or expected it to? More importantly: how glad are you that it didn't?

Process-centered Relationships

How, immersed as we are in the logic of capitalism, can we create present, non-transactional, and fulfilling relationships? How do we cultivate relationships with one another that offer the possibility of sustainability without falling into promises expecting or guarantees for future outcomes? Despite the high promises of capitalist logic, there is no formula for the perfect relationship. In rejecting that logic, we can even rejoice: there is no formula for the perfect relationship! Finally, we can set about exploring what kind of relationships are good for us, that encourage mutual respect and accountability, that are valuable to us in the here and now, and that allow us to flourish.

The largest task before us is to find where capitalist, outcome-centered logic clouds our value judgments in relationships, and I personally have been best served in asking these questions of myself, though this is not by any means a comprehensive list:

- If this relationship ended tomorrow, would it still be valuable to me today?
- Am I with this person because of who they are, or because of what I think they can give me?
- If this person decided they want a different kind of relationship with me, would I still value them? Even if I found I couldn't give them the different kind of relationship they want and had to go separate ways?
- Do I feel threatened by the other kinds of relationships this person has because I feel at risk of loss?
- What can I do to reorient my relationship values to feel grounded in my own self worth and happy that my loved one has other people who care for them?
- How can I confront my fear of loss without requiring outcome promises from the people I'm in relationship with?
- What things do I love about this person that are entirely independent from what they do for me?
- Are the things that I want from my relationships fair, just, and kind?
- Do the things I ask for from the people I'm in relationship with respect their full humanity and autonomy? Or do I ask for things that require aspects of control?

When we ask ourselves questions like these, we can begin to understand the roots of why we want relationships in the first place, what our expectations are, and whether or not there are values that we hold that we need to address and challenge ourselves on.

The topic of relationships is a deeply intimate one, and it's easy — even for anticapitalists who are used to questioning deeply ingrained assumptions — for us to write off the ways we show up in relationship as inscrutable personal preference, or “just the way it is.” But those of us who study the realm of power and seek to subvert it know that its scope does not live only in congressional halls, nor does it stop at the boundaries of the workplace, but stretches into all aspects of our lives: including and often especially our relationships. Something that is custom, that is expected, that is uncomfortable to question, is not inherently good for us and often warrants the most intense scrutiny of all.

Doing the work of reorienting the values we hold in relationship from outcome-centered values to process-centered values, away from capitalist logic, is hard and intensive work. Most importantly: it is deeply personal work. Many of us have been taught that our lives and relationships are only meaningful if they produce certain outcomes. Capitalist hetero-patriarchy tells us that having a spouse, a mortgage, children, and grandchildren are all hallmarks of success and additionally provides violent structural barriers to those who want to live by different values. It is not enough to restyle a new “free love” movement when many people's only choice for economic stability seems to require an outcomes-centered model of relationship. Rejecting capitalist logic in our relationships requires a dual approach of doing the often painful and always difficult work of learning to be grounded in ourselves (rather than externalizing our sense of worth to what others think of or are willing to do for us) and working to build communal networks of support that allow for the personal stability needed to cultivate process-centered relationships.

Some may argue that we cannot expect people to do the hard interpersonal work when there are currently so many structural obstacles to creating truly process-centered relationships: that we must abolish those structures first and then address the interpersonal. But this falls again into the same capitalist logic we find ourselves aimed at. If we wait for the perfect conditions to do vital interpersonal work, we will find ourselves eternally waiting and recreating the same maladaptive relationship values in future generations as we wait.

While it would be a mistake to pretend that rethinking, revaluing, and recreating the way we see and practice relationships isn't difficult work — it is — it would be an even greater mistake to ignore the reason we set to that work to begin with. We do this to open up joyful possibilities. A process-centered approach to relationships is ultimately about revealing. When we find ourselves connected to and in community with people we love and we refuse to let ourselves get tangled up in expecting and enforcing outcomes, we can truly revel in the best part of relationships: witnessing each other. We get to experience the joy of growing into ourselves the way that is true and healthy for us, and we get to bear witness and support those we love dearly getting to do the same. We have the potential to find both autonomy and security without having to sacrifice one for the other. We get to revel in creating with one another, and love becomes a precious gift rather than a heavy obligation.

Have you ever watched a person you love flourish and bloom? Personally, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever born witnessed too.

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