The Crises of the Human Being in the Present Economic System

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Introduction

The economic world has concentrated on the continuous financial crisis that occurred frequently in different parts of the earth. Different economic policies are discussed to overcome the problems of market imperfections, inflationary shocks etc… On the other hand there is another crisis that people on different disciplines should be concentrated on: The crisis of the human being in the existing economic system. Even if, the globalization of the capitalist world has created higher national incomes and higher growth rates in most parts of the world, the individual human being is more anxious and more depressive. Depression and suicide rates are continuously increasing especially in the developed world. This paper analyzes the reasons of this fact viewing the main problem in the meaning that the present economic order is giving to the human being. The paper will discuss how the globalized capitalist world is creating depression and unhappiness with its different facets. The first section of the paper will be based on the human being understanding of traditional economics and on two factors that traditional economics does not take in consideration: Empathy and altruism. The second section will be concentrated on the essential sentiments that the global capitalist world is causing. Anxiety, selfishness, lack of confidence, greed, anger and uneasiness are the feelings that will be explained in this part. The third section will analyze the recent suicides in the France Telecommunication Company as a real example of what is discussed in the paper.

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1) The Human Being Understanding of Traditional Economics

The human being understanding of traditional economics is rather simple. Accordingly, human being has two main properties: The first property is the human selfishness. This means that human beings seek for their own interest above all other things. What is important here, is that human beings, are selfish regardless of social and economic conditions. This property of selfishness is taken as given. The second property of human being is “rationality”. Traditional economic thought maintains that human beings are rational. The rationality principle maintains that a human being acts in a way that maximizes his / her interest in every single situation that arises in his / her life. This means that a selfish action is in the same time, a rational action. We can read the same sentence in a different manner: “Any human action which is not selfish, is regarded as irrational”.

This thought of “economic man” having its roots in Mandeville’s “Fable of the Bees” and Smith’s “Wealth of Nations” has reached to its completion with Bentham’s philosophy of utility, maintaining that every single human being is acting with the natural forces of escaping from pain and going towards pleasure which means “maximizing utility”. Reached to its completion, “economic man” is selfish, tries to maximize his / her utility in each situation and is rational since he / she maximizes his / her own interest by using his / her resources in the best way.

Even if the human being model of liberal economic thought has received critics especially on the property of rationality and the “limited rationality approach” is thought to be more realistic, it has remained stable with its main points and it still maintains its central role in the mainstream economic theory of today.

1.1) What Traditional Economy Has Forgotten: Empathy and Altruism
For traditional economic theory, the human selfishness and rationality are taken as given. This means that all human beings are selfish and rational by nature and they act in a selfish and rational manner in any situation.

If we think of a person living alone in an island, we can tell that this person will try to find food and shelter, and to protect himself from dangers in order to survive. But we cannot tell if this man is selfish or altruist. In order to have an idea of his / her selfishness or altruism, we have to know about his / her relationships with other persons. Selfishness or altruism more than being pre-determined inclinations, are determined and developed during the relationships with others.

Berscheid (2003: 38), says that men from birth to death, are in different personal relationships and that it is impossible to understand human feelings and behaviours without taking in consideration these relationships. As Martin Buber says: “I need us, to be myself”. Berscheid (2003: 45), continues by saying that human nature has the inclination to create strong and permanent relationships with other humans, or in other words “to love other humans” and that it is impossible to understand human nature without taking in consideration this inclination.

Seligman (2002: 186) says that there is a time in life that we all go into a tailspin. We age, sicken or loose our looks, money or power. We become in short, a bad investment for future payouts. How is it that we are allowed to limp onward, enjoying life for many years beyond these times? It is because other people, through the selfishness denying power of love and friendship, support us. Love is the emotion that makes another person irreplaceable to us.

Another human behaviour that traditional economics ignores, is altruism and the feeling of empathy. M. Hoffman (1981) says that altruism is part of human nature. Men are inclined to help other persons who are in need of it. This inclination has its base in the feeling of
empathy. Hoffman (1981), gives the example of an old woman willing to cross over the street in a snowy and windy day. He says that we help her because we feel inside ourselves the difficult situation in which she finds herself, meaning that we make empathy. Mc Adams distinguishes between the feelings of personal distress and empathy. Personal distress includes the feelings of sadness and anxiety when we realize that another person is in difficult situation. When we feel such a personal distress we help others, but the purpose of this kind of help is to avoid our own personal distress. Mc Adams concludes that the source of this help is our selfishness. On the other hand, when we feel sympathy and warmth to those in need of help (empathy), altruistic behaviour arises and we help others. The purpose of this kind of help is to overcome the distress of other people, not to avoid our own distress (Mc Adams, 1994: 214).

In reality, helping behaviour occurs with the aid of both feelings. When we see some other person in need of help, we feel both empathy and personal distress. Most of the time, it is not possible to distinguish between these two feelings. We help the old woman because we feel both empathy when we realize her difficult situation and personal distress because her situation gives pain to us. By helping her we avoid both her distress and our own distress.

The fact that some scientists describe helping behaviour as a selfishness arises from the fixed idea of explaining every human behaviour as a selfishness. To feel distress because of the distress of others and to help in order to avoid this distress, cannot be described as a selfish behaviour. Selfishness began when we do not get distressed with the distress of others. A selfish person is not that person who helps the old woman because he / she get distressed because of her difficult situation, but it is that person who does not care for the old woman and just continues his / her way.

2) The Feelings of Capitalism
In this section I will discuss the main feelings that arise in today’s capitalist world. I will discuss namely, the feelings of fear and anxiety, selfishness, lack of confidence, greed, anger and uneasiness.

2.1.) Anxiety

Anxiety is defined as a feeling of disturbance when someone is in expectation of danger. Duhm says that the capitalist system retains continuously awake this expectation of danger. Capitalism, by its nature, creates anxiety and it is fed by anxiety in different ways. The first way of creating anxiety in the capitalist system is via sovereign relationships. Sovereign relationships are not a must of human nature, but they are a must of the capitalist system. People obey to the structure of sovereign relationships only when there is a force coming from outside. This force creates fear. That is to say, sovereign relationships are made possible by a force applied from outside, and this force creates fear and anxiety. In today’s capitalism, sovereign relationships are not applied as clear as in recent times. Today, more “democratic” sovereign relations are used. In this way, the fear of the former periods of capitalism is transformed to a strong anxiety (Duhm, 1996).

Another source of anxiety in the capitalist system is the materialist character of interpersonal relationships. In the capitalist society, other persons are seen as enemies. They can give danger to us, they can cheat us or they can use us. In every relationship that we enter, anxiety appears. “Am I doing a mistake?”, “What does he or she think about me?”, “What is my value in his / her view?”. All these questions are the proof of the anxiety that we feel because of the fear of loosing the respect of other people.
Fear of success is one of the most intensively felt anxieties in the modern capitalist world. The success principle of capitalism, which view the success as the most important aim in the life, causes high anxiety of success. In this system, the success of others are seen as our failures and vice versa, the failures of others are seen as our success and make us feel better. In such a society, the principal feelings determining interpersonal relationships are jealousy, envy and hostility. These are feelings which feed fear and anxiety.

2.2.) Selfishness

As cited before, selfishness is accepted to be the main instinct of human behaviour in traditional economics. Selfishness is not viewed only as a very natural instinct, but it is also seen as the most rational behaviour. In today’s capitalist world, the selfish behaviour is the most valid behaviour. Narcissism which is an extreme type of selfishness and which in reality is a psychological problem is seen as a normal situation in today’s world. Narcissists seek for their own interests even in situations even in situations that are strongly harmful for other people and they do not feel themselves guilty for it. They are continuously interested with their own self. They do not take in consideration how other people feel, do not have empathy. Narcissists create very weak personal relationships. For the narcissist his / her self is the most important thing in the world. The persons that he / she is in relation are his/ her extensions. He / she cannot see them as separate, independent personalities. Another property of narcissistic personality is the chronic and intensive feeling of envy. Other peoples’ happiness become their unhappiness, other peoples’ success become their failure. They need to find enemies to realize their own power. Narcissistic personalities are increasing in today’s world, because persons that can demonstrate themselves as capable to do more things than others gain more value in the present time. The competition principle in the modern capitalistic world gives priority to
extreme types of selfishness and thus to psychopathologies as narcissism. The result is an increasing alienation and the weakening of interpersonal relationships.

2.3) Lack of Confidence

One of the most important facts of the modern capitalist world is the lack of confidence. Conditions of heavy competition in each area of life cause people to approach each other with lack of confidence. Competitive conditions do not appear only in our workplaces. A modern man / woman that spend a big part of his / her life in the competitive workplace, uses the habits, inclinations and behaviours of the workplace, also in other areas of his / her life. A certain degree of competition can increase productivity, but when it prevails in all areas of our lives, it destructs trust and solidarity. A life with lack of confidence and lack of solidarity creates lonely and pathological souls.

Competition is not the only factor creating lack of confidence in the modern life. Uncertainty is another important factor contributing to the lack of confidence.

Uncertainty is everywhere in the workplace. One cannot be sure of maintaining his/ her position even if he / she works a lot and in an appropriate way. Maintaining one’s position depends on uncertain internal and external factors such as the market situation, macroeconomic situation, and even the situation of the world economy. Especially the economic crises which have a contagious character and which are intrinsic to the capitalist system, increase highly the situation of uncertainty. In the global world, an economic crises that arises in any part of the world, rapidly expands in other parts. Monetary transactions which gain speed thanks to the computer technology, the easy and rapid movement of short tem capital and the fact that the economy is not based any more on production but on monetary movements, are very important factors contributing to
uncertainty. This kind of uncertainty is the source of a new type of lack of confidence, not existed before.

2.4) Greed and Anger

The capitalist system is continuously increasing men’s wishes. Greedy persons who want always more and more and who never think that something is sufficient, is valuable in today’s world. Frugality is an old term, not used any more. Man in the modern life feels himself in confidence and valuable when he owns more and more things. The addiction to own goods increases in parallel with the decrease of close personal relationships, altruism and humanity which are the real determinants of the feelings of confidence and valuability.

One of the most important feelings of the modern capitalist man is anger. It is an anger of a cumulative type. There are many factors in the modern society that cause this cumulative anger. In a life where close personal relationships are decreasing, where people do not trust each other and where one’s success is accepted as another one’s failure, a society full of angry people is an ordinary situation.

In humanistic psychology it is accepted that people realize themselves in societies where close interpersonal relationships, emphatic understanding and unconditional acceptance exists. In the modern capitalistic society all these properties are lacking. Psychologists say that one of the most important reasons of anger, is the feeling of being frustrated. People in the modern society accumulate anger in their inner when they cannot realize themselves. If the cumulative anger cannot find a way to express itself, this causes psychological problems such as depression, panic attack etc…

It is formerly explained in this paper that today’s society is full of uncertainties, that hard working is not sufficient to maintain our job and that an economic crises that occurs in
any country can be contagious and that as a result we can loose our job. Such a situation creates a sense of being aggrieved. This is also one of the most important reasons of anger.

The will to have power is an important piece of the capitalist culture we live in. Some people while trying to obtain power, leave other people without power. As such people gain power, they take pleasure of seeing other people less powerful. In reality if somebody is trying to obtain power in order to leave someone else without power, creates such a mechanism because he / she is afraid to be seen “without power”. The real aim is not to gain power or respect, but it is to express his / her own hostile feelings. In such a situation both parts accumulate anger. The first one, because its solitude increases, the second one because he feels himself being aggrieved.

Another factor creating anger in the modern capitalist life is rapidity. We live in an age of speed. We are always in hurry, the time is never sufficient. We do not have time to rest and to spend time with our friends, even with our children. Rapidity has the meaning of success in today’s world. We are in a hurry to compete, to succeed and to gain more and more. Kundera, in his book on “slowness” says that slowness is related with remembering, while speed is related with forgetting. We increase our rapidity to forget that we are not living our own lives. Greed and anger can be related only with rapidity, nor with slowness.

2.5) Uneasiness

The modern life although increases the income and conformity levels of people, it does not show the same effect on their peace level. Uneasiness is continuously increasing. The most important reason of this uneasiness is the increase in people’s expectations. The decrease in the satisfaction of man’s experiences in the modern life is due to the plentiness
of things they compare their own life. The fact that there are plenty of choices is contributing to this dissatisfaction. The standards that we compare ourselves increases as our economic and social conditions develop. The increase in choices causes the expectations to rise; and the rise in expectations leads to the increase of uneasiness. On the other hand as the choices increases, the opportunity cost of our choices increases also. In the case of important decisions, the existence of a high quantity of choices increases the opportunity cost of any decision and causes the subject of the decision feel guilty about the choices left outside. When there are many choices and if we think that we could not choose the best alternative we feel guilty about our decision because the best alternative was there. In the case of absence of alternatives we do not feel guilty, but when the alternatives were there, we feel ourselves responsible of not choosing the best one.

Another reason of the increase in uneasiness is the feeling of envy. Capitalism creates and increases the feeling of envy by two different channels. The first channel is the competitive character of capitalism. To compete continuously with others requires to confront ourselves with others. The system needs for its continuation the fact that we get disturbed from the success of others. The second channel is the importance that the capitalist system gives to material richness. In a society where success is extremely important, the essential indicator of success is material well-being. These two properties of capitalism increase the feeling of envy. This feeling of envy in today’s modern life is one of the most important sources of uneasiness.

All the feelings discussed until now, if lived frequently and intensively create depression and other psychological illnesses. Depression is enormously increasing in the last years and consequently the usage of anti-depressants is exploding. Depression is not only increasing but is also seen in younger generations. Schwartz say that children under the age of 14 form 7.5% of total depression rate in American society. Total depression rate is
increased 10 times in 2000s than in 1990s. The most dramatic result of depression, suicide rates, are both increasing and realizing at younger ages. According to UNICEF, suicide rates increased three times in France, two times in Norway and Australia and 2.5 times in Canada and G. Britain in 1990s confronting with 1980s and 1970s. This result is directly related with increasing expectations (the notion that nothing is sufficient), increasing selfishness and the consequent weakening of interpersonal relationships.

3) An Example from The Real Life: France Telecom Suicides

A very actual and tragic real life example of what is tried to explain in this paper is the suicide attack that occurred in France Telecommunication Company. France Telecom has been started to be privatized in 1996. The number of employees who were about 160,000 in 1996 has decreased to 100,000 in now. With privatization, its administrative structure changed in order to adapt to market conditions and to be able to compete. It has adapted a policy of stress creation. For example a rule of moving from one region to another, every 3 years has been adapted under the name of “elasticity”. Not only “regional elasticity” but also “professional elasticity” gained importance. Persons that have been specialized in certain works for long years, were expected to do completely different works in the same company. These policies led to the suicide of 32 employees in this company in two years. The examination of the suicide letters and what the relatives of those who committed a suicide say, tell us that the company policy was the biggest responsible of the suicides. Most of the suicides occurred in the workplace. The suicide committers wrote in their letters or messages that they were not able any more to resist the heavy stress, the regional and professional movements, and the non humanitarian competitive policies of the company. The company authorities announced that for a company having 100,000 employees, the existing number of suicides is a normal statistics. The CEO of the
company declared that there is a “trend of suicide” in the company. According to psychologists, the most important reason of the suicide behaviour caused by heavy depression, is helplessness and hopelessness. Today’s capitalism is creating anxious, unconfident, uneasy and angry people by seeing “success” as the most important thing in life, by increasing competitiveness, by affirming selfishness and by confirming speed and uncertainty. People having these properties become inclined to depression. Employees passing nearly all their time in the workplace, feel themselves helplessness and hopelessness because of profit seeking and non humanistic company policies. The rationale of capitalism seeing the person only as a labour force, is the principle responsible of this destruction. The authority saying that 32 suicides is a “normal statistics” is like saying that it is normal that some of the machines are ruined. This rationale that sees the human being as something not more than a machine, is depressing people and is killing the humanity.

**Conclusion**

This paper tried to explain how the present economic system is contributing to the crises of the human being. Basing the problem mainly on the human being understanding of the traditional economic thought, the paper maintains that the global capitalist system based on this thought, is creating anxious, selfish, unconfident, greedy, angry and uneasy people. These feelings when lived intensively, give rise to psychological illnesses, mainly depression. The recent suicides in France Telecommunication Company are a real world example of what is tried to be explained in the paper.

A real solution to this problem relies in the creation of a social order where people trust and love each other, develop close relationships, and where solidarity takes the place of competition. Because it is believed that another world is still possible.
REFERENCES:


