
BOOK REVIEW

Neal Wood, Tyranny in America: Capitalism and National Decay. London: Verso, 2004, 147 pp., \$33 cloth.

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Described as an “impressionistic essay” (ix), this book has no references or footnotes, something unusual for a work written by an academic. Neal Wood, who passed away in September 2003, considers whether a society grounded in competition, self-interest, and the accumulation of vast amounts of wealth can avoid social disintegration. Can a polity such as the United States survive, especially when greed seems to be its highest ideal? Is it destined to implode or can it somehow muddle through?

Wood begins by suggesting that the transition from feudal societies to capitalism generated an “astonishing inversion” (8) of views and values, a new “capitalist mentality” (5) which is today most predominant in America. One major transformation involved attitudes to “avarice” (or greed). Before the sixteenth century, greed was strongly criticized by all political theorists and Christian theologians, feared because it posed a dire threat to social unity. After this point, some writers, especially Adam Smith, began to argue that greed could advance the public good. However, Smith warned that avarice, on its own, was destructive. It had to be channeled in appropriate directions by government, through laws and regulations. Avarice (now “self-interest”) was “respectably clothed” (35), the basis of commercial prosperity, indeed the basis of civilization itself.

A second transformation involved democracy, which was roundly condemned by almost every major commentator in the two thousand years following its birth in ancient Athens. The poor had used democracy to challenge their social “superiors.” For example, small property holders and craftsmen could use government to lower taxes on themselves while raising taxes on the rich. From the perspective of the wealthy elite, this political system gave the rabble too much power. However, by the late nineteenth century, democracy, which had been vilified for millennia, quickly gained respect, even among upper classes. At the same time democracy, especially in the United States, was being rendered

“toothless” (52), a process now virtually complete. Democracy has lost its ancient meaning of rule by the poor. It now means (roughly) rule by the wealthy, where the rich have an effect on public policy that is far out of proportion to their numbers in the population. In contrast, the idea that democracy could be (should be?) a tool used by the poor in their quest for greater social equality, has receded into the background.

Wood also makes a distinction between two types of tyranny. Old tyranny is arbitrary, repressive and unjust, where opposition is often silenced through the use of brutality and fear. Old tyranny still exists. But now there is also the new tyranny of global capitalism, rooted not so much in violence and terror but rather in an immense private power, held by those who own the economy. It is avarice that drives this new, more subtle tyranny, in the form of capitalism’s endless requirement to compete and maximize profits.

Wood goes on to examine the state of the American nation, summarizing the social decay – the consequence of avarice – that is currently spreading throughout the U.S. This includes huge levels of inequality between rich and poor, homelessness, illiteracy, hunger, a lack of access to health care, school killings, drive-by shootings, and so on. It is not a pretty picture. And “democracy” in America seems impotent in the face of these disasters.

This is an extremely well-written, clear-headed account of the troubles facing America, grounded in a deep knowledge of the history of social and political thought. If there is one point that I would take issue with, it is Wood’s view that there is a “lure of America” (109) to those who live outside its borders. The preservation of the Scandinavian model and its advanced welfare state, even the presence of the liberal “Canadian model,” suggests that, at least as far as social policy is concerned, the U.S. is not especially attractive to the rest of the world. Discussion of the Christian Right, the attempt to impeach Bill Clinton, and the follies of the 2000 presidential election might have been dispensed with (as they are, for the most part, common knowledge), while Wood’s suggestive comment that the U.S. constitution may be outdated, unable to deal with the pressing concerns facing Americans, could have been extended.

Wood’s pessimistic conclusion is that the capitalist mentality is so ingrained that “no fundamental change is likely” (144) unless there is a collapse of the stock markets, or a similar calamitous spur to rethinking. A genuine alternative would have to be grounded in the opposite of avarice: cooperation. It would also require rescuing democracy from millionaires and billionaires.