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Jonah Raskin

Reflections on Greed and the Gutter

Greed rarely if ever goes out of fashion in America, yet no one ever cops to it. It's always the other person who's greedy.

And in America it's always a Gilded Age—an Age of Greed—for a minority and not for the majority. In my experience, the most recent such age kicked off during the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. It thrived all the way from Reagan and Bush I, to Clinton and Bush II, to Obama, all the way to the Age of Trump. It really doesn't matter who is president for greed to be worshipped here, along with what William James called “the Bitch Goddess success.”

My dictionary defines greed as “a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed.” One could be greedy for sex, fame, or power. It's a kind of addiction.

The gospel of greed hit me especially hard in the 1980s when I had almost no savings, no steady employment, and only part-time jobs in construction and in kitchens, washing dishes, and

for the government as a poll watcher on Election Day and working on the 1980 census, going after citizens who didn't want to be counted.

In the 1980s and for a couple of decades afterward, I witnessed the growth of greed in the world of California marijuana, which began as a key element in the counterculture, evolved into a lucrative crop in commercial agriculture, and then settled down, sort of, as a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry.

I saw what Karl Marx describes in his book, *Theories of Surplus Value* (which was originally intended, by Friedrich Engels, to be the fourth volume of *Capital*, published after Marx's death): "a criminal produces crimes, also criminal law, the police and criminal justice, penal codes, art, belles-lettres, novels. The criminal breaks the monotony of bourgeois life. He gives a stimulus to the productive forces." I watched, with the benefit of a ringside seat, as hippies from cities like Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley, and Sacramento grew pot for their own personal consumption and soon realized they had a cash crop that would enable them to survive in the remote valleys and mountainsides of Mendocino, Humboldt, Sonoma, and Lake counties that had seen better days and where, land going cheap, they snapped it up.

Since it was illegal by local, state, and federal regulations to grow, transport, or sell marijuana (or even possess it), farmers risked arrest, trial, and prison time, though few individuals were prosecuted and punished. It was too good for business for government to clamp down on cultivation, though Washington, D.C., pressured local law enforcement to attack the problem. Some pot farms were raided with help from troops in helicopters. Illegality boosted the price to some \$4,000 to \$5,000 a pound, depending on the quality and the distance the product had to travel from garden and farm to market and individual consumers willing to pay high prices.

Hippies made money, often lots of it, which enabled them to buy groceries, clothes, appliances, vehicles, and property, all of which boosted sagging local economies in Humboldt, Mendocino, and elsewhere that had suffered from the collapse of logging, fishing, and ranching and traditional crops like prunes, apples, and pears. Karl Marx would have called the phenomenon "primitive accumulation of capital." Pot farmers were modern-day pirates.

A new Gold Rush, sometimes called "The Green Rush," took hold. From as far away as Hungary and Thailand, young men arrived to grow weed and get rich quick. Naturally, local economies benefited from the illegal crop, which was shipped to LA, Chicago, New York, even Amsterdam. Law enforcement—inadvertently, for the most part—helped to set the price per pound by confiscating and destroying crops, thereby controlling supply without curtailing demand.

California replaced Mexico and Colombia as the primary source for commercial contraband weed, and at higher quality—since the product had both fewer toxic chemicals and more THC, the most important psychoactive ingredient. I wrote about the world of weed for

newspapers and magazines including *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *High Times*. With marijuana growers and dealers, I also worked on a Hollywood feature film, *Homegrown*.

The movie was inspired by B. Traven's novel about greed, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and the film of the same name directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart. The novel places the tale of the modern-day greedy gringo prospectors in the context of the greed of the Spanish invaders and colonizers who extracted gold and silver with enslaved Indian laborers and sent the wealth to Spain. That global story isn't part of the Hollywood movie.

In the early 1980s, when my northern California neighbors were getting rich growing weed, my prospects were so dismal I thought I'd die penniless and in a gutter. It didn't turn out that way. For a time, I forgot I was white and male, that I came from a middle-class family, and unlike many white working-class men who now support Trump, I had a college education that came in handy when I hunted for work in academia. Still, I might eventually have turned into a Trumper. After all, when I applied for teaching jobs, administrators told me they had to hire women and minorities, not white guys like me. Yes, they actually said that.

Europe came to my rescue. I couldn't get a decent teaching job in the States, but I was hired to teach American literature at two universities in Belgium; in Antwerp and Ghent. That's when Reagan was president. I lectured for the United State Information Agency (USIA), a division of the government that operated from 1953 to 1999, and became a spokesman in Europe for American culture — jazz, film noir, and our great writers (Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Faulkner, and more) when many Europeans I met were anti-American and definitely anti-Reagan.

In a way, I turned into my opposite and rebelled against my 1960s/1970s self who had rioted in the streets to protest against segregation and against the war in Vietnam.

When I wanted and needed a real teaching job I called on Professor Edward Said, the author of the book, *Orientalism*, and a Palestinian who was teaching at Columbia. Said assigned my rabble-rousing, defiant Sixties book, *The Mythology of Imperialism*, to his students. In his office in Hamilton Hall, Said asked me, "Have you become a conservative?" I said "No." Said wrote a letter of recommendation for me.

I had rejected the idea of securing a blue-collar job and joining the working class. Instead, I secured a full-time teaching position and didn't end up in the gutter. I didn't make a fortune or get rich, but I was comfortable, financially speaking. If I had been honest with myself and with Said, I might have said, "Yes, I'm now a conservative. I was a rebel in my youth. Not any longer." I was not going into the streets, getting arrested and going to jail. Now, I might call myself a bourgeois rebel or an armchair revolutionary. Like many of the boomers I know, I have supported the good causes—environmental, labor, and equal rights for women, minorities, and the whole crew that makes up LGBTQA2— and I write in defense of them, but I don't put my body on the line.

The fear of ending up in a gutter prompted me to do everything I could do to secure a job teaching at a college that's part of the California State University system. I was greedy in my own small way. I wanted more money, more savings, and more security than I'd had in the early 1980s. True, I didn't gouge anyone; I worked hard, and didn't short-change students, but I also became a college administrator. For a decade-and-a-half I ran the Department of Communication Studies of Sonoma State University and hired and fired faculty members. I also defended the president of the university, Ruben Arminana, when most of the faculty opposed him and called me a "sellout."

For a time, I felt guilty about my teaching position and my status, and in therapy sessions I talked to my psychiatrist about my sense of guilt. The therapist, a Chinese male doctor, assured me I had used my position to do good. But I supposed that's what therapists are supposed to do—let their patients off the hook and make them feel good about themselves and the choices they make.

If I could live my life all over again, I'd probably do the same things I did in the 1980s: teach in Europe, work for a government agency, and use my contacts and my white-skin privilege to secure a nice middle-class job.

My father, who was a lawyer and a socialist and who struggled through the Depression of the 1930s, would say to me when I was a boy, "The worst crime in America is to be poor." Well, maybe not a crime, but rather a sin or at least something to be ashamed of.

I think that white working-class men who support Trump are ashamed to be poor, or on the edge of poverty, and afraid of dying penniless and in a gutter. They're angry at Blacks, women, and members of minorities who seem to be getting ahead and doing better financially than they're doing. Theirs is the politics of resentment. I don't stand with them, but I also feel uncomfortable being lumped together with the "college-educated elites," as they're called, on both coasts and who vote for Democrats.

The 2024 election has been about class, perhaps more so than ever before, but not just class. It has also been about race and gender. From where I stand, greed is still in the saddle and rides humanity. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Things are in the saddle, / And ride mankind." I mean to recycle him. Yes, there are saints like Emerson's friend, Henry David Thoreau, who renounced wealth and material possessions, but there were and still are far too few of them.

The last time I went to Target and to another big-box store, I saw packed parking lots, shopping carts overflowing, consumers consuming. I saw the love of possessions and the worship of the gospel of greed. In the last year or so, I've downsized big time: gave away possessions, donated books to libraries, and stopped buying and accumulating stuff.

As the Vietnamese said to me during the war, "The love of possessions is a disease with them." Them being Americans. I don't expect to influence anyone else's behavior and don't mean to make anyone feel guilty, but I hope and wish the world might someday be a less greedy place.

As B. Traven knew, greed is bad for the planet and all living creatures. Read *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or watch John Huston's movie and see for yourself.

Jonah Raskin is the author of six works of nonfiction, including *The Mythology of Imperialism*, *A Terrible Beauty*, *Out of the Whale*, *Field Days*, *Marijuanaland*, and dozens of newspaper and magazine essays he has published over the past sixty years. He is now writing his memoirs.