



# The Morality Debate and the Spirit of Capitalism

By Jörg Wiegratz



*“It is not from the benevolence (kindness) of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” – Adam Smith: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

There is a common position in public debates in many contemporary societies – be it in Uganda, Kenya, Germany, the UK or the [US](#) – that we live in an age of moral decline and moral crisis. Typically, this is a more or less direct commentary on the global system that shapes all of these societies: capitalism. Well-known public commentators and analysts in these countries, such as Will Hutton in the case of Britain, will declare that current capitalism is morally bankrupt. Hutton [writes](#): “Modern capitalism’ has arrived at a moral dead end, interested largely in feathering the nests of its leaders while imposing enormous costs on the rest of society and accepting no reciprocal obligations.”

Others refer to capitalism as just plain immoral and evil; or assert that figures such as fraudulent bankers or hard core, ever-profit-maximising speculators, business owners and managers (who lay off thousands of workers, or close entire factories to move to countries with cheaper labour) have lost their moral compass. This is an argument that one comes across regularly when the latest scandals emerge around systemic, high-level, harm-producing fraud and corruption or when

heartless profit-making schemes are exposed, with those paying the price for these schemes being the most vulnerable people, including patients, pensioners, children, poor communities or an unsuspecting public.

Often, the terms “greed” or “selfishness” are dropped somewhere in these analyses as well, which implies that the money-minded actors concerned are *immoral* greedsters. Other words one regularly finds in such texts are “shocking”, “disgusting”, “devil”, “soul-less”, “cold-hearted”, “inhumane”, “indifferent”, and the like, signalling a sort of (expressed) moral unease and outrage about the critiqued actors and practices. In society usually certain economic activities, certain ways of earning a living, of making money by some groups, get categorised as immoral by some other group. And when a society experiences the rise or becoming more publicly visible of certain – say, new, more innovative, blatant, or radical – forms of money-oriented activities or ways of thinking, you will soon find one commentator pulling the analytical card that has “immoral”, or “moral decline” written on it. Representatives of the state (and the political system more broadly), the [church](#), or unions from time to time run this line in one form or another. Of course, when your analysis asserts that morals are at rock bottom, or have been crowded out, then the diagnosis is to inject “more morality”.

Let me then present some examples of this conventional type of reasoning in public debates from the African continent, more specifically South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria: *[“Is it that the moral fibre of our society is irrevocably broken...?”](#)*; *[“\[Political leaders have\] largely lost their moral compass”](#)*; *“Our freedom of expression had started eroding our moral fabric”*; *“Poor parenting and moral decay in society are to blame for runaway corruption”*; *[“\[There is now\] capitalism without a soul ... capitalism has lost its moral shine”](#)*; *“Nigeria is gradually moving into the future with greater number of its youths turning into drugs addicts and becoming morally bankrupt”*; *“Only immoral leaders would put politics ahead of Nigeria’s fiscal future”*; *“The loss of moral values threatens our common existence”*; *“Government will introduce an examinable subject in schools to teach students and pupils ethics in order to rebuild the country’s degenerating moral values and make the citizens appreciate honesty.”*; *[“Rampant criminal activities... have been blamed on lapse in moral values.”](#)* And so on and so forth. Our world is full of such statements from public officials, church leaders, artists, scholars and other professional analysts.

Notably, the youth, or groups such as “drug users”, are regularly depicted as having lost their morals. So are categories of people who just go after money, who are just in it for the money, as they say. This debate is, for instance, existent in discussions about young women dating rich and powerful old men or looking for private sponsors/sugar daddies (“transactional sex”); or about the sex-for-university-marks or sex-for-a-job phenomena, be it in [Kenya](#), [Uganda](#), or [Nigeria](#).

This debate came to the fore in Kenya recently when two women, Sharon Otieno and Monica Kimani, were killed mid last year, allegedly because of having sexual affairs with older men. [Al Jazeera](#) later ran an extensive special programme headlined: “Why are Africa’s ‘sugar’ relationships in the spotlight?”, and sub-headlined: “Murder in Kenya fuels conversation about partnerships where money and gifts are traded for sex and companionship.” And, the BBC published a long investigative piece about the phenomenon of sugar-baby-daddy/sponsor/blesser, titled “Sex and the Sugar Daddy” around the same time. Did at least one of the commentators (in traditional or social media) run the moral decline/immorality argument in this particular case too to discuss the behaviour of the women, and the issue of money and sexual relationships?

Lots of observers and analysts seem to agree then that there is a spreading of immorality – especially in the world of business – and a sort of moral regression across modern society, and that this is the issue that needs sorting. In other words, morals are a good thing (and we need as much of them as possible), and something is attacking these morals, making them diminish. Picture a kind of downward spiral, an eroding kind of trend, a society (or particular groups such as “the youth”, or

“bankers”) losing their moral values - something gets thinner by the day, something is in decline. The enemy here is immorality, not morality, or say, a specific type of morality. How easy and clear for an analysis - which one can run year in, year out - without even much need for empirical data to support the claims.

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But is this line of argument perhaps not as useful as it seems, as both diagnosis and prescription? Notably, whatever country you look at, very few commentators or scholars, let alone politicians, ever offer an analysis of capitalism and capitalist society as a moral order itself, as a moral system and moral economy with a moral grammar and all sorts of moral-economic milieus and cultures - across economic sectors, professions, locations. And, very few analysts would argue that what so many observers describe and interpret as a case of moral decline, crisis and bankruptcy, is actually a case or phenomenon of [moral change](#) in society, and what observers diagnose as a problem of immorality (or absence of morality) is actually a [problem of morality](#), i.e. a problem of particular socially dominant and powerful moral cultures, moral milieus and moral economies in a *capitalist* society, of the type of moral views, justifications and priorities, of the type of moral actors that this particular social order - and capitalist polity and political economy - tends to bring about.

That said, to get a different analysis and debate concerning morals in today's society, to move beyond the moral decline thesis and other conventional takes on the matter, three analytical insights or analytical starting points are [crucial](#): capitalism is a moral order; the so-called bad/immoral actors are moral actors too; what is happening in front of our eyes can be treated analytically as cases of moral change, not moral decline or moral bankruptcy.

### **Capitalism is a moral order**

One of the reasons for the popularity of the moral-decline/immorality argument is a particular understanding of morals that is apparently widespread in public discourse. According to this line of reasoning, morals are about being pro-social i.e. being good to other human beings; supporting others to flourish; being altruistic, caring, helpful, honest, selfless; foregoing one's self-interest; not acting on the basis of self-interest; and so on. If one starts with such a notion of morals, then, of course, one might think that fraudsters or the super-rich are immoral or that our world is in moral decline - look at all the fraud, corruption, deception, violence, inequality, egotism, and narcissism in human affairs. And if you look through these analytical lenses at the history of humanity - i.e. at the *actual* practices of human beings and the explicit or implicit logics underpinning them - then you might indeed declare a large chunk of what humans do, of human history, as simply “immoral”, i.e. as immoral practice of immoral actors, as immoral decisions, immoral rulers, immoral government, immoral societies and so on.

Human history then in many (not all) aspects looks like a story of moral decline, moral crisis, moral bankruptcy, going on for centuries. Humans inflicting misery and suffering on others, destroying families, villages, cities and countries; using, exploiting and humiliating each other - and destroying the environment and extinguishing species - because of this decline or absence of morals. In other words, all these practices - and respective repercussions for the well-being of others affected by them - exist because of other factors than (i.e. everything but) our morals. They exist not because of

the presence of (particular) morals, i.e. not because of the dominance of specific morals over others in society. If you are a morality analyst that adopts this conventional angle – morals are about being pro-social – you can ignore that big chunk of our human history, because all this immoral or amoral stuff has nothing to do with our morals, and our moral order and moral culture more broadly, and the political, economic, social and psychological factors and conditions that bring these about. To study human morals, it is sufficient then to focus on fair trade, [altruism](#), charity, solidarity, and the like, i.e. the pro-social practices; that is where the music plays.

However, you might take a different, more open, flexible understanding of morals that allows you to, analytically speaking, see morals and moral culture de facto everywhere where humans relate and interact with each other and thus matters of their well-being – and related matters of (in)justice, (un)fairness, (in-)decency, (in-)authenticity etc. – come into play, are affected, are at stake, or are negotiated. This take would allow [researching](#), [seeing](#), [discussing](#) and critiquing the moral underpinning of the entire spectrum of social practices from good” to “bad”. It would see (as some [movies](#) and [TV series](#) do) the prime sites of fraud, corruption, boardroom sell-outs, violence, humiliation, oppression, and exploitation as moral sites as well, as sites where moral codes, views and priorities operate too just as in the boardroom of the altruists (though arguably different sort of morals). How is that possible, you wonder, to find morals where they are supposedly absent, where people operate who have lost, as we heard, their moral compasses? It really depends on the definition and take on morals one applies.

But note: when I talk of moral order I don’t necessarily mean a “good” (just, humane, fair, socially progressive) order. Instead, moral order or moral culture here refers, amongst others, to an order that has a wide range of existent – dominant and non-dominant, complementing, conflicting and competing – moral norms, interpretations, views, beliefs, claims, demands, tensions, contradictions, discourses, imaginations, and so on regarding matters of good/bad, right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable, [legitimate/illegitimate](#), and so on in social relations and practices, including in the economy. And, in this sense, capitalism, and its different variants from colonial to neoliberal capitalism, is (and has always been) a moral order, culture, system too; with a wide range of moral milieus and moral economies, with a wide mix of notions of right/wrong, good/bad, acceptable/unacceptable, praiseworthy/blameworthy, with various patterns and distributions of benefit and harm, of flourishing and suffering.

Morals don’t necessarily mean or imply pro-social practice (i.e. a practice that fosters the flourishing of others, is honest etc.). As human history and research shows, there are operational, actually-existing, on-the-ground morals in particular social settings that prescribe or advance that it is acceptable, right, good, and necessary to defraud (or intimidate, threaten, evict, exploit, enslave, etc.) and thus harm another human being or social group, for particular reasons. Professionals who work or have worked in fraud-invested companies or organisations at times say – once they face a judge, investigator, or reporter, or blow the whistle – that fraud was the [culture](#) in the place, i.e. that it is/was the tacit or explicit moral culture in the organisation or team to [deceive](#), cook the books, take short cuts, short-change vulnerable customers, and so on so as to meet revenue and profit targets, beat competitors, get bonuses, and keep the job (and thus make family/region/nation proud, send the kids to good schools, save for the future and [old age](#), look after extended family, [etc.](#)).

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That said, let's look at this alternative definition or take on morals in more detail then: Morals, including morals on the ground, as expressed in actual practice, can be understood as being in many ways about how we treat one another (for instance in the economy) and how we deal with matters of (in)justice, (un)fairness, (dis)honesty/authenticity, solidarity, etc. in this context. Morals are about what is regarded as acceptable or unacceptable, as right/wrong, good/bad, proper/improper, legitimate/illegitimate, or praiseworthy/blameworthy. As you can perhaps sense already, in society, in a local market place, in a factory or in an office there are all sorts of views about what constitutes acceptable practice, what or who is moral and immoral, and so on. And you can bet that the ruling classes (the powerful, the dominant, the oppressors and exploiters) in any place have a somewhat different view regarding what is right, good, proper and acceptable than the subaltern classes (the oppressed, exploited, humiliated, beaten-up people). In other words, what different social actors regard as proper or acceptable depends on the actor's power, position in society and economy, experiences in and perspective on life and society, and so on. All this is far more open to people's views and interpretations - hence diverse, variable and changing - than the many voices in public debates want us to believe.

One of the shortest and cleanest formulations of this aspect is one by [Monika Keller](#): moral norms are "standards of interaction concerning others' welfare". In this phrasing of what morals are, the emphasis is on how we treat each other (and thus affect the lives of those involved), and what is regarded as normal or acceptable in this regard. Using this angle, the pro-social element (being altruistic, solidaristic etc.) is not a necessary part of the understanding of "morals" anymore. The morals in place could be: your welfare doesn't matter (too much; or not as much as our welfare anyway), because of x (you are...; we are...; the situation...), hence, we (are justified to) treat you in a particular way (exploit, defraud, torture, kill etc.). Morals are thus also about what are acceptable levels of interpersonal or social harm in various settings, from the battlefields in business to those in wars. With this analytical starting point, one can now begin to search for, analyse, and understand (as well as critique) morals - and moral orders, cultures, climates and economies more broadly - that underpin - i.e. render (sufficiently) acceptable, proper, right, normal, necessary - [exploitation](#), fraud, intimidation, humiliation, violence and trafficking in the economy, or the practice of leaving people who seek refuge/survival/a better life in Europe to drown in the Mediterranean. The analytical and political question then is: what are respective moral climates and moral codes, and what/who (re-) produces them, and why?

That said, from an analytical perspective we can now relate for instance [fraud to morals](#), i.e. to standards of interaction concerning fellow human beings (and their lives and well-being, and related interests) in a specific time-place context. This "standard", for at least some actors in their respective social settings, could be that under condition x, it is okay, necessary, proper, right, or good to defraud another human being, social group or class, because of z. Or, in case of corruption-infested road construction projects, the standard of those directly or indirectly advancing the deal could be something in the direction of: it's okay to get some good money (for purpose x, y, z), at the expense of future victims of road accidents due to the resulting poor roads (because part of the money meant for building material etc. was siphoned off). And this shared notion, understanding, norm or "standard" - this action justification - is of course a social phenomenon, i.e. is socially constituted: (re)produced over time by something and someone (beyond the individual fraudster, or group of fraudsters), including global, national and local politics, political economy, religion, you name it. Remember, norms (including moral norms) are "socially constituted action justifications". So, the point is to recognise that whatever the social practice in the economy, there is some sort of moral grammar - a notion of how to treat others, what is regarded as acceptable/unacceptable - underpinning it. And these views, understandings and justifications - how to treat others in economic sites ranging from agricultural fields to markets, factories, bank branches, domestic homes and so on - do not fall from the sky but are a product of society, including its history, class

and power structure, and its mode of production, as well as, for instance, the global political economy that impacts this society.

We have now arrived at an analytical point where we can shift gear: instead of mainly thinking about whose morals are right and wrong (from whatever political, philosophical standpoint), or what is moral/immoral, other questions to grapple with emerge: what are these specific morals in specific settings that bring about a certain social practice (that conventional analysis declares as immoral, inhumane etc.) and where do these morals come from, what/who (re)produces them, what has it to do with politics and capitalism, and so on. And: how do morals change over time, and why?

With this sort of take on morals, one can now understand better, and claim scientifically, that *a particular set* of morals (whether as an analyst one likes them or not) are actually present in the cases that much of public debate and commentators declare as immoral, amoral, or inhumane: from the cases of fraud, greed, exploitation, humiliation and intimidation in our high-stakes economies (where people relate and interact in order to make a living, survive, keep the job, ensure the bonus, escape poverty, get wealthy, strike riches etc.) to a capitalist economy, culture and society as a whole.

Of course, philosophers of war have for long run the line of argument that under specific conditions, for particular reasons (to protect/advance one's country, king, god, etc.), it is good, necessary, legitimate, proper, or just to kill another human being, to kill (or imprison, torture etc.) others by the hundreds or thousands i.e. to harm others, to lower their welfare levels, to limit their flourishing. If war was one context and site where some scholars could construct an argument about the morals of harming others (aka, Just War) - which was of course not just a desk-based argument but somewhat reflected aspects of the historical situation on the ground where this war-is-moral was one of the existent morals at the time (arguably advanced, then as now, especially by rulers, and profiteers of war) - then the morals-of-harming-others analysis can be [extended](#) to other social sites, contexts and actor groups i.e. beyond war, soldiers, generals (or nowadays [drone operators](#)), enemies in the battlefield and so on.

Then there is an open analytical pathway, i.e. hope that the scholarly oddity - that we hardly study, let alone gather qualitative data on the morals that underpin the *entire* spectrum of human action (from so-called "good" to "bad" actions), across history - could be addressed, and perhaps amended over time. The oddity that there is so little theory and data on the moral underpinnings of a lot of social practices that humans in the millions and billions have very consistently, for a very long time, shown and opted for in their engagement with each other when matters of livelihood, poverty, survival, wealth, power, prestige, status, privilege, career and so on are on the line: these humans have deceived, exploited, intimidated, bought-off, bullied, defrauded, killed (with ever more effective weaponry), as well as conquered, colonised, enslaved, burned-the-place, and eradicated alternative, resisting, non-compliant cultures. Given the size, significance and importance of the phenomena of concern, it is odd that the (e.g. qualitative) data set about these aspects of the macro and micro moral climates, worlds and milieus of earning a living, of profit-making, of striking riches, of accumulation, of outcompeting others, you name it, is so astonishingly small.

Anyway, once one can hold this analytical point (regarding such a take on morals), one can engage with more unconventional analyses in order to learn something about the entire spectrum of moral orders and morals of human beings. For example, some scientists have explored moral systems and moral subjectivities related to "bad stuff" and "bad actors" outside the economy: cases here range from the [mentioned soldiers and generals in war](#), to [mass murders](#), [terrorists](#), [neighbours-as-killers](#) in heightened social conflicts (in Rwanda, for example), [Nazis](#) and [Nazi Germany](#), and [so on](#). And some scholars have looked at the ["moral worlds" of state institutions](#) too, including police, courts, prison, social services, and mental health facilities, i.e. what some would regard as "bad" actors and

practices. But this literature – especially the former that explores morals that prescribe significantly (and routinely) harming others – is generally not used in the scholarship, let alone in our public debates, about the moral order and dynamics in a capitalist economy and society.

Many positions in our public debates about morals in contemporary society are, in my view, so sterile, so stuck, so analytically flat, because they do not allow us to talk about, and thus understand, the social constitution, including the politics, of these sorts of morals: the morals of the small and large “wrong-doers”, such as the fraudulent (and/or “greedy”) bankers, insurers, industrialists, traders, speculators, tycoons, doctors, lawyers, or politicians, and the moral climate in the organisations and sectors they work and operate in. The debates, as outlined earlier, mostly say: immorality (or, out-of-hand greed, self-interest etc.) is the issue and problem at hand – and this can be cured by *more* morals, including an injecting of more morals into capitalist corporations and sectors. This closes off any engagement and debate with what is in my view the real issue: morals (of treating others, of making money etc., including deceiving, defrauding, taking advantage of, exploiting, and harming others) and moral order in a society shaped by capitalism.

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One more important point: morals – notions of what is acceptable, legitimate, normal, okay or necessary practice – are (i) political i.e. shaped by political and political-economic context, and thus matters of power and conflict, and (ii) co-constituted in a social process by a variety of social actors with different – and often competing and conflicting – moral views and priorities, and of course different and competing economic and political interests. There are always power structures and processes as well as social conflicts (regarding what is right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable, legit/illegitimate) that underpin any dominant moral order, or specific aspects of that order. As an example: the absence of an effective minimum wage for decades now is a key characteristic of the moral order in neoliberal Uganda, backed, at the minimum, by a range of powerful actors and their moral views and priorities regarding right, good and acceptable and related political and economic interests.

Most public analysts that I read or listened to in our media over the years never really bothered to deeply analyse this collective nature of our actually existing morals in the economy. For instance, what are the societal processes and structures – and interplay of actors – that produce fraudulent bankers and fraud-invested banks? Crucially, economic activity takes place in an uneven landscape of power and resources in which social actors contest and negotiate over the boundaries of acceptable action. In other words, the moral order, the moral climate in the economy, or in specific sectors (say, maize production and trade in Kenya) is deeply shaped by politics and the political economy. What turns out to be the dominant practice, the dominant norm – i.e. the way things are done – is thus a “function” of power, or more specifically, of power structures and relations in a capitalist society. That basic insight makes the phenomenon and analysis of moral order so political; again, something most public commentators don’t recognise or make much of. So next time you are “shocked” about the practices and “immorality” of tycoons, bankers or managers, check out what their morals are and what they have to do with power.

To close the discussion of this point: [according to theoretical and empirical scholarship](#), the current

variant of capitalism, neoliberalism, is associated with or puts emphasis on morals that endorse matters, such as self-interest, individualism (with a focus on individual choice, gain and material success), personal enjoyment and achievement, self-actualisation, a focus on transactions and money, wealth accumulation, consumption, opportunism, cunning, low other-regard and empathy, low regard for the common good, and so on. Does some of this sound familiar when you look at your society, your town, your community? Of course, there is more to [neoliberal moral order](#) and [neoliberal moral economy](#) than I can outline here but these are some of the issues to start with.

## **Conclusion**

Those who study and emphasise pro-social morals are not wrong, but they only tell a part of the story of the morals of human beings and human society. The economy (or polity for that matter) of your country is full of and overflowing with morals (not all “good” ones, I give you that, but morals still), with millions of actors with morals and moral compasses; even the notorious, hard core fraudster has a compass, a particularly skewed one perhaps but a compass it still is. Try to go through everyday reality and observe fellow human beings and their practices through this lens for a day or two. You might find it insightful.

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