

Is Complaining about Society a Waste of Time?

There are a growing number of conservatives who, similar to their progressive counterparts, have identified capitalism as the source of a great many evils in modern society.

As the argument goes, unchecked freedom in the economic realm has led to unchecked freedom in the ethical realm; laissez-faire capitalism has laid the groundwork for the decline of democratic institutions, the breakdown of the family, and even transgenderism.

The latest iteration of this anti-capitalist argument comes via *First Things* editor-in-chief R.R. Reno in [a piece published this past October](#).

But according to professor Robert T. Miller of the University of Iowa, Reno's anti-capitalist argument is completely bunk.

In [a recent two-part article](#) for *The Public Discourse*, Miller uses solid research to show that the market is actually *more regulated*, and *less free*, today than it was in the past. Particularly interesting is Miller's point that the time when the West had the most economic freedom—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—was also “the Victorian age, a time of the most repressive sexual mores, both socially and legally.” According to Miller, “As a matter of correlation, economic freedom is inversely related to sexual freedom.”

What I want to focus on, however, is Miller's point that comes [at the end of his critique](#):

“The overall impression I get from Reno's article is that he thinks that Something Has Gone Very Wrong and he is searching for The Grand Unified Theory that explains it all. In my experience, such quests are almost always futile. Social

phenomena—whether Trumpism, political correctness, transgenderism, income inequality, globalization, or whatever—are invariably extremely complex and evolving things with complicated causal origins. Moreover, the origins of such phenomena tend to be independent of each other in important ways. Figuring out any one of them is a long, slow, slogging business, a difficult and mostly empirical inquiry fraught with uncertainty. Hence, totalizing explanations of any one phenomenon, let alone all of them together as Reno would have it, are virtually always wrong. Such explanations serve to comfort their adherents with a false sense of superior knowledge, but they provide no real understanding of anything.”

He continues:

“Young people, just like old people, are called to something grand and noble, but it lies in no exterior thing, movement, or social arrangement. Rather, the kingdom of God is within you.

Griping about the state of society is a waste of time. Are things much worse today than in the past? In some respects, they certainly are: we kill over a million children a year in the womb. In other respects, however, things are vastly better: think of how much better we treat racial minorities today, of how much better we treat women, of how much money we spend every year (both public and private) trying to improve the lot of the poor. Whether things are better or worse now than they were in the past is an unanswerable question, and nothing depends on it.”

Moved by healthy polemic, I think that Miller has gone a bit too far; there will always be some place for social critique. That said, Miller hits on something very important and very true, namely, that too many of us spend way *too much time* trying to diagnose the ills of our society in an effort to

locate their causes in one or two systems (such as, in Reno's case, capitalism).

I've been guilty of this myself, and I'm sure that I'll slip into old habits again from time to time. But over the past couple of years, I've gradually come to a conclusion that seems to be confirmed by Miller: That diagnosis can be a form of sloth—and a particularly deceptive one at that.

Sloth is traditionally classified as one of the “seven deadly sins.” In the [*Summa Theologiae*](#), Thomas Aquinas defined it as “an oppressive sorrow, which so weighs upon a man's mind that he wants to do nothing.” The fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus [showed](#) that sloth, or despondency, can also manifest itself as a state of inner restlessness, a tendency to blame one's sadness on exterior things, and a false activism.

Those who constantly seek to diagnose the causes of great social evils—through reading or writing an endless number of books and articles, listening to podcasts, watching YouTube videos, etc.—often convince themselves that they are involved in an important work. Many have an unspoken belief that if only they pinpoint the origin of the problems in today's society, if only they find the perfect way of framing it up, then they'll finally be able to beat their intellectual swords into plowshares and go about the business of living once again.

But all too frequently, their diagnostic efforts are a form of escapism that accomplishes nothing but delaying their real work in life: freeing themselves from their passions, doing the good, and being loving toward those around them.