

THE STORY OF THE WORLD WORKSHEET / WORKSHOP

Objective: Write a story of the world that explains the history, problems and paradoxes of the world in such a way that provides a meaningful way for you to live in it.

Based on Jonathan Haidt's "Three Stories about Capitalism"

Story One: Capitalism is exploitation.

Once upon a time, work was real and authentic. Farmers raised crops and craftsmen made goods. People traded those goods locally, and that trade strengthened local communities. But then, Capitalism was invented, and darkness spread across the land. The capitalists developed ingenious techniques for squeezing wealth out of workers, and then sucking up all of societies' resources for themselves. The capitalist class uses its wealth to buy political influence, and now the 1% is above the law. The rest of us are its pawns, forever. The end.

Story Two: Capitalism is our savior.

Story Two: Once upon a time, and for thousands of years, almost everyone was poor, and many were slaves or serfs. Then one day, some good institutions were invented in England and Holland. These democratic institutions put checks on the exploitative power of the elites, which in turn allowed for the creation of economic institutions that rewarded hard work, risk-taking, and innovation. Free Market Capitalism was born. It spread rapidly across Europe and to some of the British colonies. In just a few centuries, poverty disappeared in these fortunate countries, and people got rights and dignity, safety and longevity. Free market capitalism is our savior, and Marxism is the devil. In the last 30 years, dozens of countries have seen the light, cast aside the devil, and embraced our savior. If we can spread the gospel to all countries, then we will vanquish poverty and enter a golden age. The end.

Story Three: The story that has yet to be written.

Once upon a time, in the 1990s, capitalism triumphed over all other forms of economic organization, and the entire planet began moving toward prosperity. But we didn't all live happily ever after. In fact, it was just the beginning of a new chapter, in which new challenges were discovered.

The long compression of income inequality, which had begun in the 1930s in many Western nations, ended. The gap between rich and poor within nations began to shoot upwards. Economic gains went mostly to the rich, who then used their money to buy legislators and laws, just as was charged in the first story.

The problem of global warming was first recognized, just as Asia was beginning to industrialize, leading to apocalyptic forecasts of submerged cities.

The fragility of the world's banking systems was exposed in the crash of 2008, shaking global confidence in capitalism's ability to work without strong government oversight.

And as market values expanded beyond the marketplace, and started taking over medicine, education, and other domains of life, many people lamented the crass and degrading materialism of modernity.

So this is our challenge for the 21st century: We celebrate the fact that the wide embrace of free markets has lifted more than a billion people out of poverty. Yet we know we can do better. If we can strip away the anger, the worship, and the ideology, we can examine capitalism and its ethical challenges more openly.

We can see that the supply chains that keep our shelves stocked have their origins in the deadly sweatshops of Bangladesh. We can measure the polluted air and empty oceans we are bequeathing to our children. And we can have a more nuanced discussion of equal opportunity, particularly in America where schools are funded by local taxes and money buys your children a better starting line.

So let us be grateful to the butcher, the brewer, and the baker for the bounty they bestow upon us, even when they are corporations. Let us look back in awe at the political and economic changes that brought us from the first story to the second. And then let us work together to write the third story, a story that must draw on insights from left and right, and from secular thinkers and religious leaders.

1. What would be the ideal characteristics of a world that maximized human flourishing? (to brainstorm, look back at the values implied in the 3 stories, such as “real and authentic work,” “strong local communities,” health, security, equality, freedom, etc.)

2. How are we doing based on these values?

3. What are the specific root causes of our shortcomings based on story one?

4. What are the specific root causes of our shortcomings based on story two?

5. Brainstorm and list all of the key facts and events that you think should go into the story of the world, based on what you have learned in this class and elsewhere.

6. Use Haidt's Story Structure to brainstorm your story:

"Once upon a time," ... Describe how the world used to be before the coming of global capitalism:

"But then one day," ... Describe capitalism and its effects on people throughout the world:

Heroes, Villains, and Victims ... Who are the heroes, villains, and victims in your story? For example, in story one, capitalism is the villain and the 99% are its victims and there are no heroes. In Story two, capitalism is the hero, Marxism is the villain, and people living under communist regulations are the victims. Who should the hero of the 3rd story be? Choose a hero that you can believe in and that you think can build a better world. The hero can be a social institution, a movement, an economic structure, or an idea.

For example, one organization trying to write the 3rd story is Conscious Capitalism. Their credo reads:

“We believe that business is good because it creates value, it is ethical because it is based on voluntary exchange, it is noble because it can elevate our existence, and it is heroic because it lifts people out of poverty and creates prosperity. Free enterprise capitalism is the most powerful system for social cooperation and human progress ever conceived. It is one of the most compelling ideas we humans have ever had. But we can aspire to even more. Conscious Capitalism is a way of thinking about capitalism and business that better reflects where we are in the human journey, the state of our world today, and the innate potential of business to make a positive impact on the world. Conscious businesses are galvanized by higher purposes that serve, align, and integrate the interests of all their major stakeholders. Conscious businesses will help evolve our world so that billions of people can flourish, leading lives infused with passion, purpose, love and creativity; a world of freedom, harmony, prosperity, and compassion.”

Major obstacles ... What are the key problems and challenges that this heroic journey must face to be successful? What are the key obstacles to human flourishing that we must address in your lifetime? (See for example Haidt’s story 3 which lists inequality, environmental issues, and corruption.)

Climax, Crisis, or Core Conflict ... Most stories have rising action that leads to a climax in which the hero must face a core crisis or conflict. This often involves an attempt to resolve some fundamental tension or internal conflict. Oftentimes it becomes apparent that all of the obstacles and problems are generated by this core conflict that needs resolved. The core conflict Haidt identifies is between those who embrace story 1 vs. those who embrace story 2 (roughly left vs. right in American politics). He thinks that “if we can strip away the anger, the worship, and the ideology, we can examine capitalism and its ethical challenges more openly.”

What is correct about the story 1 perspective and what is correct about the story 2 perspective?

How are these perspectives in conflict?

Is it possible to resolve those conflicts?

Resolution: Haidt suggests that we need left (story 1) and right (story 2) ideas to build a better world. How could this work in practice?

Your take: Is Haidt right about the core conflict and resolution? Do you have other ideas about what might be the core conflict or crisis of our times and how we can resolve it?

Write your final story here: