

Capitalist Humanitarianism with Lucia Hulsether

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

Christiane: Ethnographer and historian of religion Lucia Hulsether joins me on the show today to talk about the strange phenomenon she calls “capitalist humanitarianism.” She studies the ways that corporations try to distance themselves from capitalism by doing good. In an attempt to mitigate harm, they sell environmentally-friendly goods or promote socially-responsible investing.

Lucia Hulsether: I wanted to know with this project kind of where did that come from? This kind of corporate humanitarian impulse? And also how did folks on the Left kind of buy it? At what point did folks who were committed to a sort of socialist redistributive politic start to think, you know what, the way to do this would be through working *with* rather than against free market capitalism.

Christiane: We'll discuss fair trade, microfinance and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show, Lucia Hulsether. We're here to discuss your book, *Capitalist Humanitarianism*. So, briefly, introduce us to your project and help us understand what the phrase “capitalist humanitarianism” means.

Lucia Hulsether: So the project started as my doctoral dissertation. What I wanted to know when I started out was something about the history and evolution of what I think is kind of a proliferation of projects to reform neoliberal capitalism “from within.”

I've spent a lot of my life in various movements for economic justice, racial justice, immigrant rights. And when I was going to college in Atlanta, at Agnes Scott College, one of the things I noticed in that town was that there were a lot of big companies, most notably Coca Cola, that were doing business in ways that were quite harmful to vulnerable communities, that were often

quite abusive to workers that were sort of privatizing public goods in the city and the country and the world, talked a great game about their social justice projects and their multicultural values.

And as someone who had come up through a number of left activist spaces, I wanted to know with this project kind of where did that come from? This kind of corporate humanitarian impulse? And also how did folks on the Left kind of buy it? At what point did folks who were committed to a sort of socialist redistributive politic start to think, you know what, the way to do this would be through working *with* rather than against free market capitalism.

So I'm thinking about projects like fair trade and microfinance, like sorts of impact investing, corporate philanthropy. "Capitalist humanitarianism" is a word that I use in this book for the range of these projects that I just named—the kinds of economic models for doing well by doing good. But it's not just a word for the collection of those projects. It's also a word for the kinds of ideals and hopes that I argue undergird them, which is the hope that global, exploitative, dispossessive capitalism can be harnessed to rectify and repair the harms that these same economies inflict.

Christiane: In my twenties it was, it was in the early two thousands, and I thought, "Ew, capitalism's bad—the coffee that I'm buying is, like, actively harming a bunch of people who grow the coffee. So what's the solution? Oh, I'll buy fair trade coffee. That's the solution because fair trade coffee, they do it fairly." So you call, you call this a re-enchanted commodity relation. So what does that mean? What does that look like?

Lucia Hulsether: So let's do a little history of fair trade. Fair trade companies, like Equal Exchange, like 10,000 Villages, we could all name a fair trade organization. This all started... the first major fair trade was founded by the Mennonite Central Committee and was called 10,000 Villages. Well, it wasn't called 10,000 Villages then, actually it started as something called the Overseas Needlework Project. And there were these women who were missionaries who noticed that people in Puerto Rico and also in occupied Palestine were really suffering under military rule and displacement and poverty.

And they wanted to know how can we help people, how can we help these women help themselves? They had a critique of the ways that sort of US and like Western European-dominated globalization was dispossessing the poor and empowering the rich. And they also had a critique of the paternalism of a lot of sort of normative charity work. And the way that they thought about, like kind of going about building I think what they would call solidarity, with poor women around the world was to empower (there's a lot of language of empowerment) was to empower them to kind of become economically productive. These Mennonite women who were mostly based in Pennsylvania and some in, in Canada would provide the crafts to be able to make needlework for women who had been, who had been displaced, who were poor,

who were looking for more income and livelihood and would bring back these crafts and sell them to people at their churches.

This is like in the 1940s and early 1950s. So around, like right after World War II, in this moment when US global consumer empire is really, really expanding. Around the world, you have people who are like, "Yeah, this just doesn't feel right. This seems materialistic, this seems vain but maybe we can create an alternative economy that will bring social justice to our economic relationship." So it's really, I mean, I think a very noble hope on the part of some of these folks, which doesn't mean it is beyond critique.

There's a similar story we could tell about fair trade coffee emerging, when leftists in the 1980s were trying to create markets that would bring income to Central American peasant farmers who were often like aligned with leftist revolutionary movements that Ronald Reagan's administration was trying to crush. So, people in the Global North are wondering how do we support the industry livelihood or business organizations of these farmers? We can buy their coffee. So all all great. This ends up growing into not just a kind of fringe or like subterranean project to redistribute and recirculate income. It ends up growing and growing and growing in until we have something like Tom's Shoes where this is a where they like consumer transactions become a stand-in for political solidarity.

Christiane: I have to wear shoes. Why not Tom's Shoes? Why not buy a pair of shoes and then have that company give another pair of shoes away?

Lucia Hulsether: I think Tom's Shoes are uncomfortable and, and poorly made. That's one reason I would say not Tom's Shoes. What I don't, but what I don't want folks to hear when I like make a critique of fair trade coffee or Tom's Shoes or whatever is, it doesn't matter whether you buy the plantation coffee or the fair trade coffee. What I would like people to hear is: buy the fair trade coffee. Think of it perhaps as a form of harm reduction and harm reduction doesn't mean the harm isn't there.

Sometimes you'll hear like consumer, like organizations like fair trade organizations being like your dollar is your vote. Well, one, there's a problem with that because you shouldn't be able to buy votes. And second of all, your dollar isn't...we, we should have a more robust concept of democracy than that. It, of course matters where we put our resources. But if we start to sort of cede the ground of the political to what we are doing when we are making transactions with private corporations, then that's a real loss for the other kinds of building and social movement work that we could be doing.

So you asked me about a minute ago about the kind of the re-enchanted commodity. There is a, there's an old, like sort of classic Marxist critique and analysis of the commodity fetish. So Marx

in *Capital: Volume One* has this, this, this passage called “On the Commodity Fetish and the Secret Thereof.” Before we kind of go into what Marx is doing here, I want you to think like how normal it is for you and I to like, go to the store if we want a pair of shoes or we want coffee, we'll like hand over our credit card or we'll give the person at the cash register \$100 bill and they'll give us some change and we'll like, get that thing that we want.

Likewise with labor. If I, if I'm like, short on cash right now, maybe I'll go like, drive a couple of people around in an Uber and the hours that I dedicate as a laborer, I will exchange with the Uber parent company for a wage and I will have traded the labor that I do for, for whatever the like, substandard, like contractor fee that Uber pays me. That's a pretty, like normal way to kind of think about, you know, if I need money, I should probably work more. I should probably commodify my labor and get something. If I need something, I'm gonna pay for it and then I'll go to the store, I'll go to Amazon dot com or whatever.

When Marx is writing *Capital* this does not seem normal to him. He is looking around and he is kind of appalled that objects in the world that do really, really different things for people are all of a sudden given this kind of equivalency in money. So I have a pen. I also have a hat. These things, maybe five of these pens equals one of these hats because the pen was a do, they were a dollar each. The hat was \$5. I decide that I'm going, I need five more pens. So I'm going to, I'm going to like sell this hat and get \$5 and then get five more pens. Well, for Marx, this does not, this does not make a ton of sense because what if I still need to shade my eyes from the sun? A hat does really different things for me than a pen.

That's fetishism for Marx. That's like a kind of like sorcery and witchcraft. Like, how does that make any material sense? There's this kind of triangulation of qualitative, Marx would say, like objective, concrete social relationships between people, between living things to this sort of like triangulated social relationship between things. One of the things that fair trade does—and this will bring us back to Tom's Shoes—is to say, oh, the commodity like, yeah, the commodity could be bad if it's like leaching the lifeblood of something. If I'm commodifying your labor and that's like somehow exploitative to you. Then that's bad. But what if, what if a commodity could like bring, what if, what if, what if commodification could like bring life to, to our relationship?

All of a sudden, my purchase of a to a pair of Tom Shoes isn't you know, paying \$50 for a pair of like the kind of substandard canvas shoes manufactured in a factory in China by underpaid laborers who sold their labor for not very much money and were made insecure by it. All of a sudden like that's not what's signified in my purchase of the shoes or me wearing the shoes. Instead, my economic transaction is forging a relationship with that child who is getting a pair of shoes across the world. And no longer taking something from them or dehumanizing them by exploiting their labor, but giving them something.

And so the re-enchanting commodity is this idea that, all of a sudden, the commodity can come to signify like, an intimacy of relationship or as a form of solidarity between people who otherwise would be, would be separate from each other. And so, you know, if there's a child in Kenya without shoes and I buy a pair of Tom's Shoes, the corporation which is Tom's promises to kind of like broker a connection between us which is kind of what I'm buying is the fantasy that all of a sudden I have solidarity with this poor child across the world. And of course, that's very racialized.

Often the images that Tom's puts on the internet and on their advertisements and a lot of other kinds of like sort of conscious consumer companies are of black and brown people who are poor, who are enjoying the fruits of the capitalist, sort of philanthropic and humanitarian gestures that moneyed, privileged consumers in the global North have made possible.

Christiane: Another part of like these capitalist reform projects that you talk about is the microfinance industry. So a very simplistic way of explaining it is that a bank gives out microloans to women in Guatemala to fund their weaving businesses. And these could be loans, literally loans of like \$1000 or something, right?

Lucia Hulsether: Or like, \$50.

Christiane: Yeah, super, super small amounts of money. And so when you're talking about the microfinance industry, that's your sort of entry point into talking about ethical capitalists' obsession with record keeping and storytelling. Why are they so obsessed with you know, not only giving the loan to this woman in Guatemala. But gosh, making sure that they have her picture and her story for their pamphlets and making sure that they have accounted for every single way in which she spends that \$50 to \$1000.

Lucia Hulsether: So fair trade and microfinance often are these sort of two kind of founding capitalist humanitarian kinds of projects. Often microloans are funding the fair trade businesses and the commodities that then get sold. So my research was both historical, what's the history of like organizations like Equal Exchange and 10,000 Villages and other fair trade groups. But then also it's was also ethnographic. I accompanied different microfinance and investor kinds of figures to their, to the places in, particularly in Guatemala where they were evaluating, they were evaluating both communities and individual people for financial sort of financial investment.

It's really important to say for microfinance that these are loans that are that often come with very high interest rates. It could be a \$20 loan, but it, it could come with, you know, 35% APR and that's a, that's a conservative estimate. It's probably gone up since I did this research and the justification for this is, these are very high risk borrowers.

I lead with that, I lead with that partly to draw attention to the absence of some of those like hard financial facts in the way that microfinance and microcredit are sort of presented to a general audience. The most kind of mainstream representations of microfinance are Kiva.org, which is a website that reminds me a little bit of like a dating profile website where you like go onto the website and there are these like little like postage stamp-sized images of mostly black and brown people and descriptions of their businesses and individual donors, that's people in the global North who are browsing these websites, can go and like click on the person who they deem via a narrative to be the most deserving of their their financial support and give a loan of \$20 to Juana whose tortilla business like needs a little bit of an extra boost.

You're not actually lending directly to Juana, you're lending to the financial institution that is bulking together loans and giving them to women like Juana. There's a kind of narrative mystification of this. The nuts and bolts of how these things work are not easily accessible. What is accessible is these very flowery narratives of rags to riches, of triumph, of the responsibility of the deserving poor to kind of pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and overcome.

So, when I was in the field, there was a week where I was in Guatemala and I was going around with this guy who was the in-country director for Central America. And he was going around evaluating people for financial support from the microfinance group. So he's like, you know, asking all these questions about income about the kinds of non-liquid assets the cooperative had. But what we were also doing was going and meeting with individual people and surveying them about very intimate questions of their lives. Like how many chickens do you have in your house? Like, how many kids do you have? Like by how many husbands? What's, how much income did you make last year? Like, do you self examine yourself for breast cancer?

Questions meant to sort of assess their biological status, so they're all of these data points that are getting collected. But what I noticed was that while we were in the field in these very, very rural places, the US-based office was constantly texting and calling us asking, "Are you taking pictures, are you taking pictures of the people you're meeting? Do you have narratives of them?"

What's getting projected on the outside and what is perhaps even more important in a public way is creating these narratives of individuals who have by virtue of their like hustle and grit and moral fortitude used the resources of the bank responsibly and become more prosperous global citizens.

So it's about the sort of entry way into a kind of global economic citizenship. It's interesting because those narratives are often about disciplining the potential donor, somebody like you and me, the sort of liberals who are like, oh, like we want to help somebody, it must be easy to

go on to Kiva and like give \$20 to someone. Like I feel like I have this excess money. I don't really know what to do with it. I feel guilty about poverty.

There's that narrative, they're creating a commodity out of the image of these laborers. And this again, kind of sense of intimacy and solidarity that can be practiced through a transaction that again is going to a bank, it's going to a private bank, it's not going to them. On the other side, there is this really intense emphasis on "accountability" for the people who are receiving the funds.

So, like the amount of energy and time that poor people in Guatemala and a lot...and any place where that has microfinance or microbanks are like NGO development bodies there, have to spend accounting for tallying, filling out paperwork of what they're doing and how they're using the money. And are they using it responsibly and reporting it? It is such a waste of time. It is so tedious.

It's about creating this accountable self, this individual self, who will be able to self-surveil self-monitor and sort of self-represent as a pliable, submissive citizen of the global financial world. It is about creating legibility for these subjects. But for those of us who are looking at it, not like on the scene and who aren't always subject to that level of invasive surveillance.

It's like a, you know, one paragraph story of I was poor and my dad left and then I had 10 kids and I dream of them to have a better future. So now I'm like weaving socks and selling them at the market. And can you like help me like empower my children, too? But what is happening behind the scenes is is these very is is these very aggressive and invasive entries into people's intimate lives that then get kind of recrafted by somebody who probably, who may or may not even speak the first language of the person they're interviewing into stories that can be marketed for consumers and again, 35 to 60 to 70% APR. So who is, who is coming out with that interest? It's the bank.

Christiane: So yeah, I'm, I'm struggling to formulate a question. And part of that is my struggle to formulate questions generally about this book because it's really important to me. It's a book about what it means to be an anti-capitalist who can't escape capitalism and the pain of that, the actual pain of that and the feelings of claustrophobia that come about. And you have this beautiful passage towards the end and you write, "'There is no way out of complicity,' I replied, my tired refrain. 'Next time I will scream until my vocal cords collapse.'" So I just wanted to know, I mean, you don't have to answer this but how do you deal with this? How do you deal with the fact that there's no way out of complicity?

Lucia Hulsether: Sometimes when I'm presenting this work, especially when I was writing it and was sort of trying to come to language. One of the questions I would get is like, well,

where is your hope? Like, what do you want instead? And I don't think there's no hope. And I think that they, you know, there is this sort of commitment to negativity. And a sort of like looking at the extent of the violence that we are living in and not, not imagining that I could get out of it, that I think the book is really trying to insist on. Another way of defining capitalist humanitarianism is as like a bad response to grief. That the person who is most likely to be attracted to a kind of capitalist humanitarian project is one who knows how violent and irredeemable our current orders are and is perhaps like moved to rage and sadness and despair by it and is trying to figure out a way to like live on. And the entities that have the easiest and most like, consumable in their packaging solutions for this, are corporations who expend billions of dollars, understanding what, what you and I are like sad and despondent and afraid about and then offer something to us on a package: "You can be in solidarity with this poor person. We know you're overwhelmed by the like behemoth that is capitalism." And so, so I'm talking around this, but I think that like, just I, the first thing I want is do is like acknowledge just like how, how hard and intractable it is. And how the kind of capitalist humanitarianism as a, as a response to loss that actually, that feels good for a second, but then re-entrenches all the systems that have that have created the dispossession in the first place.

There is a lot of solidarity to be found in that the practices and the communities that are built through, through collective struggle to build something else and not build something else as in, let's make a more responsible corporation, but to build something to, you know, to create social democratic spaces within our institutions that appropriate resources and then redistribute them through networks of care.

There's a long thread in the book about organizing graduate student sort of union projects at Yale University where I was studying at the time that I wrote this book. It was like a guaranteed defeat. We were not gonna win, but there was a kind of, I think integrity in the work of fighting anyway, and what kinds of possibilities could be revealed and what kind of worlds could form in the sort of this, the, the spaces that and the relationships that we built in struggle. And so I think like, okay, like where are those places around like me now? Now that I'm in Saratoga Springs, where are they around any given listener?

You can find moments and potential for political solidarity without having to look to like the coffee bag that and like the person across the world. Something is happening like in your neighborhood right now. And so learning how to look for those spaces and to see the kinds of like the, the imminence of other, other ways of like, of organizing ourselves. But I think that the way to do that is also to recognize just how easy it is for those projects to get co-opted and how omnipresent sometimes the desires to like institutionalize something and have the easy fix. Well, if I want to support like X thing, I'm gonna go to like, I'm gonna search it on the internet.

Well, actually, some of the most projects most worth doing are hiding from the bright lights of surveillance and they should be. And so, I find, I think like this sort of meditative process of like looking at how much is, is wrong and how much has been lost. There are many of us who are, who are feeling that. And then the question is, what do we do with that and dwelling in it I think can help create a reorientation of like where we could build relationships.

Christiane: Towards the end of your book, you write, "If apocalypse has already happened, the question is not about becoming good or doing good. The question that follows critiques of pervasive violence should not be what is the alternative? The question is, what would it look like to not misuse existence in what is already a ruined landscape?" So what does that mean for you?

Lucia Hulsether: So the book in some ways resembles a kind of traditional academic monograph. So there are the, there are six research chapters that are about different sort of scenes, elements, histories of capitalist humanitarianism. In between each of those chapters—and also there are what I'm calling, for lack of a better word, "interludes" that are passages focused on kind of the narrators becoming and process as a thinker in the material conditions that framed the writing of the manuscript itself.

So, one of the conditions are a couple of key things. One is the graduate union big protest push and its aftermath at Yale and the other one which we haven't talked about yet is, is the death of my younger brother, Mark when he was 26. And I was on a hunger strike with the Yale Graduate Union when Mark died from suicide while he was working... or really was like a, it was at the same time as he was working in this very miserable and I think dehumanizing call center environment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And for it to be, for it to have been in a call center where he was experiencing psychosis, and the call center was framing itself as this like humanitarian organization that was like providing services for people who were hearing-impaired. Was, it was just, it was like, it was so much. Also Mark, I mean, Mark is like, you know, my was my, was probably still is in some ways my first interlocutor and would read all my work. I felt like I had been dropped in like, like some landscape that I had no connection to and I didn't have a map and I was looking like for coordinates. And so in that time, like I started, reading a lot of novels, a lot of theory that had been sort of composed and thought in spaces and context of loss and violence.

And one of the, one of the books that I read was Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* which he wrote while in exile in the United States during and after the Holocaust, separated from his community. And like he, you know, had lived through fascism in, in Europe and been displaced by it and lots of people very close to him had died.

And then he gets to the United States which is like advertising itself as like freedom. And he is, he is a, you know, as a good Marxist is horrified, he looks around him and he is like, there is

there, there the, the extent of sort of commodity culture, consumer culture, lulling people to sleep and masquerading as democracy when this is not actually democracy was, was horrifying to him.

And so, at one point, he, he's like, you know, he's just like, like deeply depressed and he writes, he writes, "There's no way out of entanglement. The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence. And for the rest, to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively, and unpretentiously as required. No longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe in hell." It's like a deeply, deeply bleak quote.

And the idea that, yeah, there's, there's, there's no way out. Which I think for me reframes this question of like, well, what's the alternative? If you don't like good capitalism what do you want instead? And when someone is in deep grief and I don't think there's anything particularly special about, about my loss or... like everyone's loss is irreducibly specific. But I think in those moments, there is a kind of clarity that can emerge. It's like, well, what do you want? Like your brother's dead, what do you want instead? That's kind of how I started to feel.

Every time somebody tried to ask me like, what did I want instead? I'm like these, these people like these, these corporate overlords killed my brother. What do I want? And I want him to be alive and what I want is impossible. So, what would it mean to not misuse existence? Well, one, it would be to ask better questions. When there is a recognition that like the big thing, like we, we've probably lost it. Like the, that there is a lot that has been lost. We're living in the ruins of capitalism. There is so much that cannot be repaired.

Now, if I begin with that as my premise, that's not ceding the ground of world-building to the corporate elites. It's saying, I have nothing to lose because, because I have already lost the thing that matters the most. And so what can I create from this space? For me, it's a deep grief, but it's also a meditation on changed stakes where the stakes become higher, not lower if loss is imminent. There's a possibility of trying to see what could grow there and not being so afraid that like if I make a radical critique of capitalism is the, you know, are the good corporations, you know, not gonna not gonna exist anymore, will it just be ceded to the bad corporations?

Well, no, like actually I want, I want more than that. I want my brother to come back but then on the micro level, like I want that call center to be shut down. "To not misuse" is, it's a different kind of aspiration. It redefines a lot of what we do on the day to day basis as a kind of misuse of existence. But then it, but it's a different question like how can I do good? It is maybe a check against pride and a check against sort of false forms of repair or false forms of false and destructive and palliative kinds of comfort in the wake of an ongoing project of empire that is recruiting us every day.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Capering]

Christiane: If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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