

# **The Evolution of Capitalism: A Comparison of British and American Literature**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the evolution of capitalism in British and American literature. The impact of capitalism on the lives of individuals has been well represented in both American and British literature throughout the centuries. The paper will discuss how seminal British authors such as Thomas More, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and George Orwell use capitalism as central themes in their writings. In addition, the paper will also discuss how seminal American authors such as Benjamin Franklin, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and Ayn Rand use capitalism in the development of the characters and themes in their writings. One dominant theme from both streams of literature is how capitalism impacts the lower class citizens in society. Another dominant theme that will be presented is how wealthy capitalists are portrayed in both American and British Literature. The concluding section of the paper will compare and contrast how British and American writers use capitalism in their writings.

## **Introduction**

In order to understand how capitalism has evolved over time, it is necessary to understand the origins of modern capitalism. The establishment of the mercantile system and the creation of a financial recording system were critical in the establishment of modern capitalism.

### *Origins of Modern Capitalism*

The origins of modern capitalism took place in Italy in the fifteenth century. Venetian merchants are considered to be the creators of the first mercantile system and Venice is considered to be the birthplace of capitalism (Lane, 1963). Due to its location, the sea port in Venice was used to facilitate trade between Europe and the Middle East, Africa and Asia. As a result, the Venetians were able to become global merchants. In addition to the ability to transport goods freely around the world, the other major component of the creation of modern capitalism is a financial system, which records the transactions. Luca Pacioli, born in 1445, is considered to be the father of accounting and bookkeeping. Pacioli developed the double entry accounting system which is the foundation of recording financial transactions between parties. Pacioli was also the author of the first accounting textbook published in 1494 which included the process to develop financial statements (Sangster, Stoner and McCarthy, 2007)

## **Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism by British Authors**

### *Sir Thomas More Utopia (1516)*

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* presents an ideal society in which individuals work in harmony to the benefit of the common good. *Utopia* can be considered a book in which both economic and moral issues are addressed. Southall (1973) argues that More views that capitalism rewards. The individual's drive to succeed and creates the deadly sin of pride. This motivation of the individual results in negative consequences for society. In *Utopia*, More presents an ideal society in which private property is abolished so that the accumulation of material goods cannot take place. Therefore, More presents an alternative to the

mercantile system and capitalism by destroying the concept of an economy which is based on money (Southall, 1973). More's belief is that the wealthy have accumulated resources unjustly and that they have exploited workers in order to accumulate their wealth by paying and treating workers poorly. In addition, More believes that the wealthy use the legal system to their benefit in order to protect their wealth (Southall, 1973). More argues that the wealthy not only protect their money through the legal system but also ensure that the poor are unfairly treated through the criminal system. In *Utopia*, More states that:

*"By one means, therefore, or by other, either by hook or crook, they must needs depart away, poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers, with their young babes, and their whole household, small in substance and much in number, as husbandry requireth many hands...And when they have wandered abroad till that be spent, what can they then else do but steal, and then justly pardy be hanged, or else go about a -begging?"*<sup>1</sup>

As a result, society is created based on the power of the rich who use their influence to create a legal and economic system which forces poorer members of society to break the law in order to survive (Southall, 1973). Therefore, More argues that as long as individuals have private property, they will accumulate their wealth and use their power to their own advantage which could never result in a just and fair society. More summarizes his view on private property by stating:

*"I'm quite convinced that you'll never get a fair distribution of goods, or a satisfactory organization of human life, until you abolish private property altogether. So long as it exists, the vast majority of the human race, and the vastly superior part of it, will inevitably go on labouring under a burden of poverty, hardship, and worry."*<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in More's *Utopia*, money and private property do not exist in their society. Every individual works at collecting food which is stored in a centralized warehouse. Each individual has a six hour working day so that the individual has free time in which he or she can become involved in other activities such as attending lectures and playing leisure games (Halpin, 2001).

Since there is not a capitalist system to guide the individual's contribution to society, in More's *Utopia*, the central government is required to be actively involved in assigning the work to the individuals. Every individual is assigned a trade and is required to learn that trade in order to make a valuable contribution to the Utopian society. Each individual is also required to help in growing food for the community (Marriott, 2004)

### *William Shakespeare*

One of the greatest writers in British literature, William Shakespeare addressed the issues related to capitalism in many of his works. Two reprehensive works are the plays *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*.

#### *The Merchant of Venice 1605*

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is a Venetian merchant whose wealth is completely invested in merchant ships and, therefore, did not have any liquid capital. Antonio's best friend, Bassanio asked Antonio for some money in order to court a rich noble woman. Since Antonio did not have any money available to give his friend, he went to the money leader Shylock for a loan (Kish-Goodling, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas More, Francis Bacon and Henry Neville. *Three Early Modern Utopias: Thomas More: Utopia/Francis Bacon; New Atlantis/Henry Neville: The Isle of Pines*. (1999): 22

<sup>2</sup> Thomas More. *Utopia*. (1965): 66

Therefore, Antonio represents the ideal of capitalism and is considered to be part of the bourgeois class who obtained their wealth through mercantilism (Netzloff, 2003). Based on his religious beliefs as a Christian, Antonio does not believe in charging interest for a loan, but, Shylock, who was Jewish does charge interest. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church forbid the lending of money with any interest. Shylock agrees not to charge interest with the condition that he will cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body if he does not pay back the loan in full in the three-month time frame, as agreed upon by Antonio and Shylock.

This agreement highlights the usury nature of loans. Usury is a term used to describe an unreasonable high interest rate that is incorporated into the loan agreement (Kish-Goodling, 1999). As a result, a negative consequence of a capitalist society is that individuals can charge high rates of interest on individuals which could be considered "exploitive". Furthermore, individuals who cannot pay back the loan will become caught in an endless downward financial cycle of having to continue to pay more interest on loans in which they cannot afford to repay in full. Therefore, Shylock's character highlights the unequal relationships in commercial exchange that are structured to favor the wealthy. In addition, these commercial exchanges enhance the capital and power of those who have accumulated wealth. The loan agreement also describes how different parties have different levels of negotiating power in financial transactions (Netzloff, 2003).

### *King Lear 1606*

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare discusses the connection between power and having private property. *King Lear* presents a setting in which England was moving from a feudal to a more mercantile based economic system. The description of the feudal system is one in which there was a great level of human suffering and social injustice for those who did not have private property.

In the play, King Lear has a competition with his daughters to see who would succeed him to the throne. This form of competition can be linked to the rise of a competitive economic relationship among society due to capitalism. In addition, the introduction of the competition also highlighted the negative consequences of a competitive environment including the emergence of greed and betrayal in order to achieve the goal of becoming the next queen.

*King Lear* addresses the political issues related to the challenges of controlling the food supply, the injustice of land ownership and the stewardship of natural resources (Archer et al., 2012). Shakespeare presents the two edged sword of property ownership by showing how dividing his property negatively impacted King Lear. The decision to divide his kingdom ultimately resulted in King Lear losing his property, his status, and power in society, his daughter and eventually his own life (Buck, 1996).

### *Charles Dickens*

Like William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens wrote numerous works which focused on capitalism and the industrial revolution which was occurring during his life time. Two novels which represented two distinct messages related to capitalism are *Hard Times* and *A Christmas Carol*.

### *Hard Times (1854)*

In the novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens describes the working and living conditions of industrial town called Coketown. He describes how the industrial revolution has physically impacted the town and the townspeople:

*"It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it: but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed*

*themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast pile of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the lead of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.*"<sup>3</sup>

The workers in the factories of Coketown are considered as just a set of able hands in the production process and are interchangeable and can be easily replaced with new workers. Therefore, Dickens focuses on the negative consequences of the industrial revolution. He vividly describes the horrendous working and living conditions of the workers in Coketown. In addition, he describes the monotonous repetition of the tasks of the workers which also highlights the negative impact on the workers in that they are considered to be equivalent to a machine as a means of production. The owner of the factory, Mr. Josiah Bounderby, is portrayed as the hated industrial capitalist in the novel. Mr. Bounderby's actions demonstrated that he was only concerned with protecting his own self-interests (McIlveen, 2007). Mr. Bounderby did not have any sympathy for his workers and "managed" his factory by ignoring the needs of the workers in order to have safe working conditions (Brantlinger, 1971). The owners of the factories are not concerned with fulfilling their ethical and moral obligations to the workers.

As a result, Dickens disagrees with the concept that factory owners are able to self-govern their actions with a laissez faire approach to capitalism. Dickens infers that the government must be responsible for monitoring and controlling how the workers are treated in the factories. (Brantlinger, 1971). This dystopian environment highlights the distinction between the working class and the wealthy. While both classes live within the same town, because of their wealth accumulated through exploitation of the workers, the wealthy are disconnected from the suffering and the living conditions of the working class (Raj, 2012).

### *A Christmas Carol (1843)*

In March 1843, Charles Dickens was given a copy of a government report on the abuses of children who were employed in mines and factories in England. In response to the report, Dickens initially wanted to write a commentary on the report and what was originally going to be a politically focused pamphlet entitled "An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child". Instead, Dickens decided to write a novel which would eventually become *A Christmas Carol* (Chakraberty 2014).

As was the case with *Hard Times*, *A Christmas Carol* focuses on the negative consequences of the industrial revolution and capitalism. The main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, was portrayed as a selfish, greedy man who had no concern nor recognition of the needs of other individuals. However, as opposed to Mr. Bounderby in *Hard Times*, Scrooge is given a second chance to redeem himself. Dickens seems to be implying that industrial capitalists may not be inherently immoral and unethical, but may also be ignorant of how their decisions impact the lives of others. Therefore, it could be argued that one of the underlying themes of *A Christmas Carol* is that industrialized capitalists can have a conscience and can "do the right thing" if they realize what the true consequences of their actions are to others in society (Chakraberty 2014).

With the aid of the four ghosts, Scrooge was able to view his past mistakes and realize that he still had the opportunity to make amends. Therefore, Dickens was sending an optimistic message to his readers by presenting the argument that capitalists may not perceive their wrong doings to others until they see the results for themselves. In addition, it could be argued that because they do not live in the same

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens. *Hard Times*. (1858): 223

neighborhoods as the workers, the industrial capitalists do not understand the living conditions of the workers (Chakraberty 2014). As a result, *A Christmas Carol* demonstrates Dickens' belief that it is never too late to change your course in life.

*"...no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused!"*<sup>4</sup>

George Orwell  
1984 (1949)

*"Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism as I understand it."*<sup>5</sup>

George Orwell 1946

With this underlying mission in his work, Orwell had hoped that there would be a socialist revolution, by any means necessary, in England to "overthrow" the capitalist system. Orwell believed that socialism was a better alternative than capitalism because capitalism had failed to treat everyone equally. Socialism would resolve the problem, in Orwell's view, of the mismatching of production and consumption since the government would determine the level of production and, therefore, assign the workers to produce the predetermined level of output. In Orwell's society, there would be no private property nor a class structure in society and the government would control the economy. The government would also control the wage rates of all the workers, including the managers of the factories (Menand, 2003).

It was Orwell's underlying belief that capitalism is bad and socialism is good that becomes an underlying theme in his novel, *1984*. In the novel *1984*, the controlling government party stated that capitalism was a failure and resulted in a creation of a world of poverty and slavery. However, the central character of *1984*, Winston Smith, had discovered that even though the previous capitalist society was not ideal, it did generate a society in which individual prosperity and freedom was present. In addition, Orwell described the challenges of a government to implement a controlled centralized economy in *1984*. As a result, even though Orwell did not like capitalism, he acknowledged that there were benefits of capitalism for society. (Vaninskaya, 2003). Orwell understood the complexities of both a capitalist and socialist society.

Orwell wanted to contrast the capitalistic and socialistic systems with the totalitarian dystopian state presented in *1984*. It could be argued that Orwell was presenting the ideal that even though there are inherent challenges with a socialist state, totalitarianism is not a viable alternative society. In addition, capitalism should not be the structure of society since capitalism is based on a social system of class in which individual competition creates a society of winners and losers. As a result, this inequality of classes will become a permanent fixture in society and will be passed down from one generation to the next (Gindin 2002).

*"The real objective of Socialism is human brotherhood. This is widely felt to be the case, though it is not usually said, or not said loudly enough. Men use up their lives in heart-breaking political struggles, or get themselves killed in civil wars, or tortured in the secret prisons of the Gestapo, not in order to establish some central-heated, air-conditioned, strip-lighted Paradise, but because they want a world in which human beings love one another instead of swindling and murdering one another."*<sup>6</sup>

George Orwell, 1943

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens. *Christmas Books*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: (1901): 21

<sup>5</sup> George Orwell. "Why I Write". Ganrei editors J. B. Pick and Charles Neill. 1946.

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell. "Can Socialists Be Happy?" *Essays* edited by John Carey. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2002.

## **Summary of Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism By British Authors**

The work of Thomas More, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and George Orwell can be integrated into an evolutionary discussion on capitalism. The forerunner of capitalism is the feudal system which Thomas More addressed in *Utopia*. From the feudal system, William Shakespeare, through works such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*, move the focus from a feudal economic system toward a mercantile capitalist society. Through observation of an industrial England, Charles Dickens moves the discussion forward from the mercantile system to industrial capitalism. Finally, George Orwell through his works including *1984*, presents socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism. Figure 1 visually presents this evolutionary discussion on capitalism by British authors.

## **Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism By American Authors**

*Benjamin Franklin*

*Poor Richard's Almanac (1759)*

As his contemporary Max Weber described him, Benjamin Franklin's economic philosophy is based on the capitalist spirit in which each individual has the ability to work hard, resulting in the accumulation of wealth and the increase of status within society (Parks, 1996). The cornerstone of what would become the description of the "American Dream" was that individuals need to have the ability to own property, have as minimal as possible intervention by government and have a laissez faire capitalist system in which individuals can be motivated to work hard and be rewarded for their efforts (Parks, 1996). Minimal government intervention included Franklin's belief that having minimum wage laws is not beneficial to society since it would increase the cost of goods for the working class which would reduce the demand for the goods which would lower the financial performance of the firms and would ultimately lead to higher levels of unemployment (Parks, 1996).

Franklin believed that it is the individual's responsibility to accumulate wealth through hard work and frugality and is credited with the saying "a penny saved is a penny earned". Franklin also believed that the reward for hard work was not only the accumulation of wealth but also the fulfillment of a necessary part of every individual's life. It is through the accumulation of wealth that individuals should not focus on the personal benefits which wealth provides, but on the opportunities wealth can provide to help those in need. Franklin believed that charity should not be considered as a hand out for those in need but an avenue through education and medical assistance to help an individual become a productive member of society (Parks, 1996). However, Franklin was suspicious of the poor who used charity as a permanent support mechanism instead of using charity to enhance their ability to contribute to society as morally productive members of society (Parks, 1996).

Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* became the cornerstone for Max Weber's book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that was published in 1905. Weber believed that Franklin's spirit of capitalism was the ideal type of individual in which to incorporate the Protestant Work Ethic in individuals. As a result, the Protestant Work Ethic integrates the religious and economic values of being an ideal contributor to the development of society (Kessel, 2006).

*Ernest Hemingway*

*To Have and Have Not (1937)*

*To Have and Have Not* was written during the depression in the 1930s. The main character of the novel, fishing boat captain, Harry Morgan, had to constantly battle to survive within the law. Because of his financial problems, he was forced to start participating in black market activities by moving illegal cargo and smuggling Chinese immigrants from Cuba to Florida. *To Have and Have Not* highlights the challenge of individuals in their ability to stay morally and ethically correct in their actions in order to get money to survive in a capitalist society in which corruption and dishonesty are common traits. Hemingway also described how, in a free market capitalistic society, individuals would be willing to sacrifice their own personal relationships in order to support their business operations. Hemingway also presented the theme that a laissez faire capitalistic society will always create winners and losers due to the intense competition for the accumulation of wealth.

In *To Have and Have Not*, Hemingway addresses the social and economic issues based on class structure (Brown, 1953). Harry Morgan is a “have not” in the economic system and therefore continued to fight the capitalistic system up until his death. Alternatively, the idle rich, “the haves” are perceived to be people who have contributed little to society (Adams, 1937)

Harry Morgan, the principal character in the book, stated as he was dying “*One man alone ain’t got. No man alone now...No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody—chance.*”<sup>7</sup>

*John Steinbeck*

*The Grapes of Wrath (1939)*

*The Grapes of Wrath* describes the life of migrant workers during the Great Depression. Steinbeck focused on the individual challenges that are created when capitalism “fails” because of a financial collapse. Steinbeck presents the injustice of individuals such as the farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath* who suffered in the Great Depression through no fault of their own.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck discussed the monopoly power of the banks and the corporate industrial system as the “enemy” of the individuals. The banks are considered to be evil because their control over capital forced individuals to live in extremely poor living conditions. The industrial system is considered the enemy of the farmers since it forced the workers from their homes through foreclosures and they became migrants. In the novel, The Bank of the West controls the Farmers Association which ordered a reduction in the wage rate of the workers. The family focus of *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights that the power of the love within a family is no match with the power of the banks and industrialists enforcing living conditions in which there is no escape for the families (Choi, 2006).

*The Grapes of Wrath* describes the dehumanizing process of families struggling to survive. The dehumanizing of the individuals occurs because they do not have sufficient material goods to survive under humane conditions (Godfrey, 2013). In addition, Steinbeck describes how society evolves with the development of the mechanization of farming which weakens the social standing of the migrant workers. Steinbeck demonstrated how the transition to a more automated farming process made the previous small family farms inefficient and obsolete. This was a similar theme as presented by Dickens in his description

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<sup>7</sup> J. Donald Adams. “Ernest Hemingway’s First Novel in Eight Years.” *The New York Times* October 17, 1937.

of industrial England. Collusion among the corporate farming operations also negatively impacted the family farms and, therefore, created an agrarian dystopia.

It could be argued that Steinbeck viewed industrialization of farming as an immoral outcome of a free market capitalist society (Keough, 1993). In addition, Steinbeck describes that the working and living conditions of the workers lead to the rise of a labor union to protect the rights of the workers who went on strike demanding better working conditions. Instead of embracing the union, the corporate farms hired strikebreakers to try and destroy the union.

*Ayn Rand*

*Atlas Shrugged 1957*

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand presented the ideal society as a complete laissez faire economic and social system in which the government should not play any role in the lives of individuals of society. From an ethical perspective, Rand believes in Ethical Egoism in which the self-interests of the individuals are also the ethical values and moral compass of the individual. Rand believes that individuals who pursue their own self-interests will have the freedom to be creative and the ability to obtain personal fulfillment and purpose in life. Rand believed that being selfish should be considered a virtue since the individual will satisfy not only his or her own self-interests, but also make a significant contribution to society and will be driven to succeed (Rubin, 2007).

Rand views the value of each individual based on his or her ability to work and his or her contribution of his or her output to society. Therefore, if the individual cannot contribute to society, the individual do not have value in society. Individuals will only support and contribute to charities only if it is in the best interests of the individual (Fletcher, 1974). As a result, Rand takes Franklin's American Spirit one step further by presenting a society in which individuals working to pursue only their own individual goals without using their resources to improve the standard of living of other members in society. Ayn Rand writes that:

*“The moral justification of capitalism does not lie in the altruist claim that it represents the best way to achieve ‘the common good’. It is true that capitalism does—if that catch-phrase has any meaning—but this is merely a secondary consequence. The moral justification of capitalism lies in the fact that it is the only system consonant with man’s rational nature, that it protects man’s survival qua man, and that its ruling principle is: justice... ‘The common good’ is a meaningless concept, unless taken literally, in which case its only possible meaning is: the sum of the good of all the individual men involved. But in that case, the concept is meaningless as a moral criterion: it leaves open the question of what is the good of individual men and how does one determine it?”<sup>8</sup>*

### **Summary of Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism By American Authors**

As was the case with the first section on British Authors, this section describes how capitalism has evolved in American literature. The starting point is one of the founding fathers of the United States, Benjamin Franklin. Franklin established the framework for what would become described as the Protestant Work Ethic. Ernest Hemingway took an alternative approach to capitalism by describing the challenges the individual battles with capitalism. In his seminal work on migrants during the depression, Steinbeck moved the description of capitalism forward to describe the challenges of how society battles capitalism when capitalism fails. In a revised version of the American Dream, Ayn Rand addresses capitalism from an Ethical Egoism perspective in which the individual's self-interests are the only important components in

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<sup>8</sup> Ayn Rand. “What is Capitalism?”. *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. New York: Signet. 1986:12.



driving the decisions and actions in a laissez faire capitalistic society. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the discussion of capitalism by American authors.

### **British and American Literature on Capitalism: A Comparison**

#### *British Literature*

With a history of over 600 years of capitalism, British literature on capitalism has focused on the transition from a feudal system to a mercantile system and then to the industrial revolution. The British authors focused on how the shift in capitalism has impacted British society. While their American counterparts were more willing to embrace a laissez faire capitalistic system, the British writers in this paper were more forthcoming in presenting the negative aspects of capitalism. In fact, it could be perceived that the British writers were giving warning signs to the readers about the dangers and perils of society embracing a free market capitalistic system. This warning was supported by the work of George Orwell who tried to convince his readers that socialism was a more equitable alternative to capitalism.

#### *American Literature*

Founded as an independent country from Britain in 1776, American literature had a very different starting point in the development of capitalism. Early literature describes the positive nature of the Protestant work ethic for not only individual success, but also as a necessity for the advancement of society. Benjamin Franklin had set the foundation for the belief of the Capitalistic Spirit and the ability to achieve the American Dream if people work hard. Therefore, as opposed to condemning the capitalistic system, some American writers condoned and embraced the laissez faire economic system, with Ayn Rand presenting an ideal society in which everyone succeeds solely by looking after their own self-interests.

However, the great depression fostered voices that pointed out the weaknesses of the free market system. Steinbeck and Hemingway wrote novels in which both individuals and families were “punished” due to the failure of the economic system. These voices demonstrated that capitalism is a very complex system which has numerous strengths and weaknesses.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, centuries of literature from both British and American authors have demonstrated that the concept of capitalism has evolved over time. Like an organic system, capitalism adapts to the changing views of society and reconfigures to the every changing demands of society.

Figure 1

## Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism By British Authors

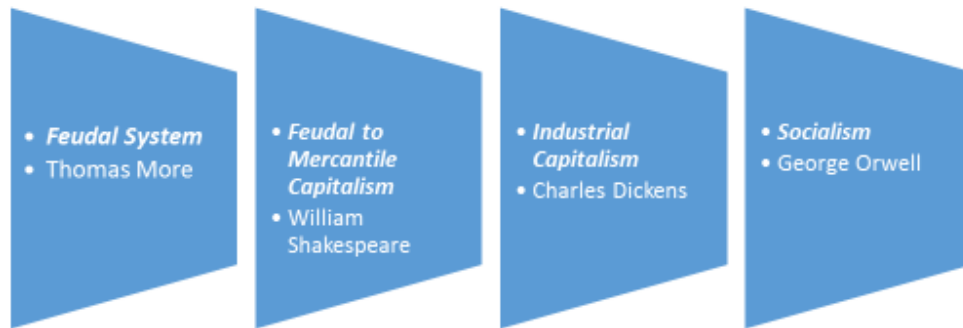
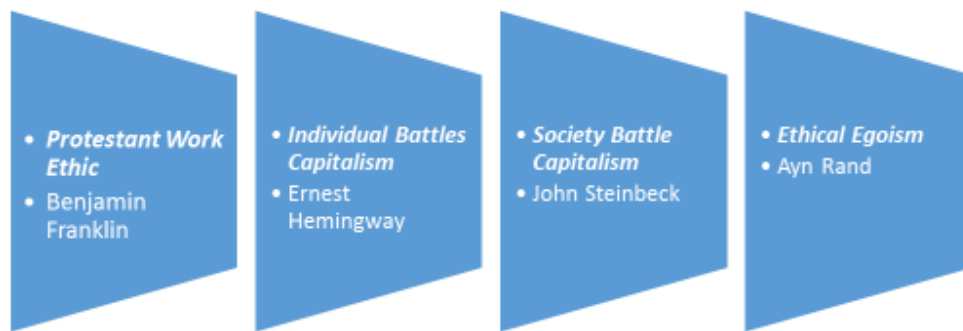


Figure 2

## Evolutionary Discussion on Capitalism By American Authors



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