

More than just consumers
Linda McQuaig *

About the same time the tsunami was hitting the shores of southeast Asia, North Americans were hitting the stores in the usual Boxing Day shopping frenzy.

In other words, North Americans were behaving in a way we consider "normal." Indeed, the desire to accumulate ever more material possessions is regarded today as not just normal, but basic to human motivation.

What is considered less normal - if not downright aberrant - is the spree of giving that broke out unexpectedly among ordinary people as the scope of the tsunami tragedy unfolded in the past two weeks.

The outpouring of concern and generosity toward helpless people halfway around the globe came as something of a surprise here, prompting initially tight-fisted governments to come up with responses more in keeping with the spontaneously generous impulses of their citizens.

Could it be that there's more to the human personality than our business-dominated culture encourages us to believe? Maybe we're not all just walking replicas of Homo Economicus - the robot-like character whose motivation revolves around his insatiable appetite for material gain - that lies at the heart of modern economic theory.

Despite our indoctrination in the joys of a life devoted to consumerism, there seems to be some sort of deep human inclination to connect with our fellow human beings - an inclination that isn't really part of the main script of capitalism.

On a CBC Radio phone-in show, callers were making suggestions for government action that were right off the charts - like urging Ottawa to send a chunk of the multi-billion-dollar federal surplus to tsunami victims. One caller suggested that \$1 billion would be appropriate. (Obviously, somebody hasn't been to business school.)

But our business school mentality would be mystifying to those who lived before the rise of capitalism a few centuries ago.

Traditional societies discouraged greed, seeing voracious economic appetites as potentially destructive to the social bonds of the community.

This changed under capitalism, which hailed greed as the engine of growth that would lead to prosperity for all - a contention still routinely invoked, despite plenty of evidence around the world to contradict it.

With the emergence of a particularly mean-spirited form of capitalism in the last two decades, greed is now positively celebrated.

No longer considered an ugly human trait, greed has gone mainstream. As high-profile consumer Barbara Amiel unabashedly told Vogue magazine, "I have an extravagance that knows no bounds." Imagine her saying she had a "callousness" or an "insensitivity" that knew no bounds.

A magazine ad for Mitsubishi nicely captures the new spirit of unbridled greed. Beneath a photograph of a well-dressed executive surrounded by pricey personal communication devices, the caption simply states: "The world doesn't revolve around you ... But we're working on it."

So pervasive is the consumer culture in our society that one could easily conclude acquisitiveness is what humans are all about.

But Karl Polanyi, the late economic historian and anthropologist, disputed this. He argued that while every society is designed to meet the basic material needs of its members, an intense focus on greed and material acquisitiveness is unique to modern capitalist societies. By contrast, pre-capitalist societies typically focused more on family, clan, religion, honour, etc.

Polanyi argued that the most basic human characteristic - found in every human society across the ages and around the globe - isn't material acquisitiveness but rather a need to relate to other humans, to feel part of a larger community. Above all, we're social animals, Polanyi insisted. Aristotle made a similar observation centuries earlier.

This suggests that preserving our communities - and the natural environments that sustain them - may be essential for human well-being.

You'd certainly never guess this from the way our governments behave. Under pressure from the business elite, they've directed their energies in recent years toward helping corporations maximize profits. Meanwhile, governments have reduced their role in protecting what used to be called the "common good" - a notion that some would regard as almost as "quaint" as the Geneva Conventions.

But it's encouraging to occasionally be reminded - as we were with the public response to the tsunami disaster - that our obsession with consumption and material acquisitiveness may not be part of our human hardwiring, but just a behavioural defect we've developed under capitalism.

It's interesting to note that in medieval times, merchants determined to make large profits - the equivalent of today's business executives - were seen as anti-social, even repulsive. One tract from the 14th century attacked such people as "Man-haters, opposite to the Common good, as if the world were made only for them."

To which, Mitsubishi would now reply: "Not yet, but we're working on it."

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