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Research Article



Class Struggle: Money, Power, Oppression, and Resistance

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Abstract

The paper contributes to the lifelong dialogs about the capital-labor conflict between the upper-class (bourgeoisie) and the working-class (proletariat). It unpacks the ideological underpinnings driving the insatiable quest of the capitalist class for profit, power, interminable exploitation of the working class across ages. The paper underscores the knack of the upper-classes to exert limitless authority over the working classes given their control of the means of production in ways that include dictating the working conditions, wages, hours of work, and engaging the apparatuses of the state – laws, judiciary, police, and army – as detailed by Althusser, to enforce their compliance with capitalist ideals (80). It ascribes the continued failure of the working-class to successfully resist and overthrow the brutal

capitalist machinery to encumbering *False Consciousness*; described as a mental trap that propels the class to accept and naively participate in their own economic oppression. The predilection of the members towards individualized forms of resistance as against forming formidable alliances across interest groups to pursue collective action is equally found culpable. Alongside forming alliances, the author suggests outright rejection of bourgeois ideologies which permeate the major spheres of the society and their replacement with the workers' own ideological alternatives as imperative. Consistent with Marx's submission, workers' ownership of the means of production to produce their own necessities rather than continually selling their labor for a living wage is considered expedient in their struggle to disable the capitalist machinery system (571). This is coupled with textual analysis of media and popular culture, for example, newspapers, television, advertising, games, and films, by the audience; mostly comprising the working class, to unearth and disavow the entrenched capitalist ethos. The paper examines two films that exemplify how the capitalist class systematically exploits their subjects with feeble resistance.

Keywords: Capitalism, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Poor Masses, Marxism, Capitalist Ideology, false consciousness, Culture industry, Media, Pop culture, Collective action

Introduction

Karl Marx's treatise on social stratification give telling pointers to the interminable struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (319). The bourgeoisie, denoting the upper class of the society is composed of a small percentage of individuals who occupy the highest place and social status, are usually the wealthiest in society. The proletariat, on the other hand, refers to the working class who trade their skills and labor to get wages and may include white and blue-collar workforces. With respect to the conflict between both classes, Marx's work mirrors the fraud perpetuated by the former through a two-pronged economic and ideological tactics, machinated to constantly keep the former subservient and impecunious to its capitalist machinery. Implementation of first tactic leads to the engagement of the working classes in the omnipresent factories of the capitalists where their labor power is exploited for optimum profits. The second entails an ideological social control in which the consciousness of working class is twisted at variance with realities to keep them perpetually subjugated to the whims and caprices of the system.

Notably, over many decades ago, Marx speculated a socialist revolution which he envisioned would lead to the ultimate demise of the capitalist system and the working class attaining political and economic freedom and control as its resistance to the system gained traction (11). But against his prognosis, the system has waxed stronger and manifestly lengthens its tentacles down through the ages and across geo-cultural frontiers. In his speech, several years back in Bolivia, Pope Francis, the current head of the Catholic church describes the economic system intolerable.

He remarks: "This system is by now intolerable: farm workers find it intolerable; laborers find it intolerable communities find it intolerable, peoples find it intolerable.

The earth itself – our sister, Mother Earth, as Saint Francis would say – also finds it intolerable” (Hausmann).

Pope Francis’s outcry stems from the unbridled nature of capitalism, which is driven by profit maximization at all costs, unfortunately, to the detriment of the working class or poor masses. Considering, Marx’s seemingly failed forecast of about its demise since past decades, this paper examines several reasons for the seeming indestructibility of the capitalist system which to many scholars is at the heart of the pervasive inequalities in human development in the 21st century.

The Capitalist Ploys

One key explanation for the infinite growth of capitalism is the notion of False Consciousness, a phrase used to describe the mental trap that propels the working-class to accept and naively participate in their own economic oppression. Research ascribes the skewed mentality to the lifelong lies, misinformation, and deception propagated by the capitalist machinery (Allahar 93 & Ratner 674). Without the willpower and capacity to challenge and stop their exploitation, many workers are trapped in low-wage jobs with poor working conditions, without opportunities for social economic mobility, job insecurity, and lack of control over their hours of work and tasks assigned, and social protection. On instances they realize protecting interests depends on their capacity to challenge their mistreatment, the system promptly responds with a strategy of co-optation which seems to promote the yearnings of workers on the surface, but furtively enervate the long-term success of their opposition (Bryson, Clark, Freeman, et al., 152; Wright, 957). The cooptation strategy which often include job promotion, recognition for a job well done, incentive pay, holiday pay, and inclusion into aspects of the system to create a false sense of belonging in workers, but not intended to incorporate them into the core machinery.

Louis Althusser, a neo-Marxist, explains the function of ideology in the preservation of the capitalist system. He raises questions regarding why the working classes are readily submissive to the system and the weak resistance against it. He illustrates his view of ideologies and ideology in the capitulation of the subjects of capitalism through an all-pervading superstructure, he tagged, the Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, which operate at two levels of implementation (142). The first is the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which generate and dispense ideologies and values which individuals and groups innately internalize and act upon at societal spheres including family, schools, religions, the legal systems, arts, politics, and sports. Interactions at these spheres, Althusser articulates, tie participants to the apron strings of the capitalist class and wittingly or otherwise acquiesce to the preservation of the system.

The second level of Althusser’s superstructure is the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) which includes state institutions, such as the police, courts, armed forces, and immigration and used to compel compliance to the capitalist values or reprimand erring subjects through violent and non-violent coercive tactics that may involve employee termination, monetary fines, detentions, beatings, and killings. Considering the extensive function both apparatuses in the interpellation of the subjects, Althusser forecloses freedom

from their upper-class oppressors, remarking that having ‘always already’ been positioned through the ISAs, they are ‘always already destroyed’ by the RSAs (112-119).

Adorno & Horkheimer, foremost scholars in the Frankfurt School, explore the subject through the lens of the culture industry which they assert produces commodified culture to implement the capitalist tenets and worldview (72). The culture industry describes both the commercial and state-owned organizations involved in production, marketing, sponsorship, distribution and exhibition of cultural goods and services such as films, TV shows, books, newspapers, and sports events. Likening the industry to factory assembly lines where standardized cultural goods are mass produced, the Frankfurt School theorists explain that the system manipulates audience to purchase the goods or services based on their desire for them rather than based on a genuine need. This implies the system not only foists a mass culture that compels a false and insatiable unappeasable appetite in people for consumption of goods that fail to meet their interests, but also interminably robs them of rational thinking and self-agency, to keep them consistently docile and tamed.

Contemporary hi-tech capitalism provides a clear peek into the way the working classes are wont to hand back their meager earnings to the super-rich tech titans in Wall Street and corporate board rooms to acquire tech products that promise everything from self-gratification and a sense of belongingness, but fail to salvage them from their predicaments. Smartphone, tablet, and computer devices today are mostly in diminutive sizes and incredibly helpful for multifarious expediencies including e-mailing, word-processing, voice messaging, text messaging, video chatting, video gaming, web surfing, and movie viewing, shopping, learning, socialization, and entertainment. But while the devices have radically upended human experiences, their obsessive use lends to the importunate manner the capitalists’ machinery has deployed it to apprehend embody the body, soul, and spirit of the masses for its own eternal fortification. The frequency of the products’ mutation in the guise of new models or upgrades which, unfortunately, costs the consumers more to procure, but often with negligible differences between prior and new models, attests their weaponization to incessantly reap off the unwary working class.

Practices in mainstream commercial (American) cinema is similarly instructive in the relentless undertakings of the capitalist system to suppress the working class. Like their counterparts in manufacturing, tech business, and the like, movie producers are fixated on profitability, hence, their fusion of aesthetic elements, technological manipulations, a wide variety of camera angles and movements, coupled with illusory narratives and spectacles, that glamorize sex, violence, gangsterism, heroic stunts, and corruptions, to induce viewership largely constituted by the working class. The standard practice of inserting film viewers in dark exhibition rooms of the cinema hall with associated large screens and projector devices to transmit films’ scenarios, further serves as a perfect contraption to create believable illusions intended to keep them in passive state, as though, transcendental subjects, literarily living in dark space and time. In such state, the body of film viewers, except for their animated eyes through which they are held spellbound, become numb as if administered a mild dosage of anesthesia that puts their bodies in cessation, with only their inner minds

awakened; as it relates to film, to absorb the entrenched ideology. Badury describes film viewers at that moment as “chained, captured, or captivated” (294), as “Both specular tranquility and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is of the inscription of the film work” (296).

Like the cinema, advertisements offer the tool to promote the capitalist agenda of profit-making agenda. Sated with images, concepts, messages, and aesthetic elements that compel consumers’ patronage and appetite for capitalist goods, they are used to legitimize commodity fetishism, whereby consumers perceive the goods as possessing magical properties that could help meet their varied needs (Jhally, 87). But instead of the promised benefits, the products deliver broken promises to consumers, while the capitalists make the anticipated profits. The reality is that no sphere of the society is spared from the capitalist advertisement incursion which are visible on newspapers, magazines, malls, television and radio, eateries, sports arenas, museums, billboards, schools, churches, brochures, Internet, wears, doctors’ office, theater halls, subway, airports, public and private vehicles, and more.

Dismayed by the idiocy of consumers in their quest for the goods, Adorno and Horkheimer remark that the “Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them” (133). Seeing the working class as the architect of their misfortune because of their acquisitive tendency for capitalist goods, the theorists assert, “Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (134). In view of their deep cultural ties to the pleasure goods, Adorno and Horkheimer foreclose a possible revolution on the part of the working class, observing that even where the consuming class choose to “rebel against the pleasure industry, all it can muster is that feeble resistance which that very industry has inculcated in it” (87).

Resisting The Capitalist Underpinnings

For Gramsci (1988), the plight of the working classes is not beyond redemption. On that he proposes cultural resistance as a potent tactic that could help reclaim their humanity and freedom from the system. The tactic entails using literature, music, film, graffiti, drama, posters, photography, poetry, and the like, to create counter capitalist culture and differing values. This would necessarily include forming robust alliances, building intelligent and principled leadership, and exploring nonaggressive movements and campaigns. Gramsci observes the heavy use of culture instead of coercion to proliferate and instill its values and educe consent, hence, an equal measure to combat the machinery.

Hall, on the other hand, proposes textual analysis of profit-driven and mass-produced culture encompassing media and popular culture to uncover demarcate latent ideological cues in them. In this manner, the receivers can determine what to consciously accept and reject in contrast yielding to meanings assigned by the producers. Inarguably, the media plays a critical role in viewers’ enactment of self-hood. Describing the media and related cultural texts as critical to forging a sense of selfhood and identity Kellner writes:

Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the

power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed. (9)

In, essence, media text and cultural artifacts affords critical tools to shape and control users' sense of reality in congruent with capitalist ideals.

Movie Analysis - *The Crime of Father Amaro* (2000)

The crime of Father Amaro (2000) is a satirical indictment of the church system in the light of Althusser's ideological apparatus which implicates it in positioning the masses in line with the capitalist system. The film shows that behind the solemn façade and sanctity of the church system are numerous vices such as illicit sex, corruption, politicking, money laundering, treachery, drug deals, power tussle, and victimization of the poor.

At the start of the film, the audience see young Father Amaro, a newly ordained priest, and a protégé of a ruthless bishop, report to the premises of a Catholic church in the small town of Los Reyes in rural Mexico. He is to assist Father Benito, an elderly priest and leader of the church parish, who is notorious for laundering money from a drug lord and uses it to fund hospital and orphanage projects for the poor in the community. Father Benito, who has a romantic affair with the owner of an eatery in the town, is of the holds the view that bad money is good money, if it is deployed to just causes. Also, in the hierarchy of the church is Father Natalio, who is alleged to support left-wing insurgents in the community and Father Amaro is briefed to report his engagements.

As the story unfolds and Father Amaro assumes his priesthood role, he is soon enmeshed in a succession of immoralities, beginning from meeting Amelia, a 16-year-old celibate catechism teacher in the church, who at first sight, becomes infatuated with his charming boyish look and seeks to befriend him, while already dating a young journalist, named Reuben. When Amelia meets with him in the confessional and mentions masturbating while she thinks about Jesus, he comes short of reprimanding her impiety, and instead remarks, "Sensuality is no sin," apparently, acceding to her verbal advances. By his lecherousness, Father Amaro not only desecrate the religion he seeks to promote the sanctity by sleeping with Amelia, but also by wrapping Amelia in the clothing like the Virgin and affirmed her is the more beautiful of both.

His sexual escapades with Amelia which contravenes the regulation of the church on mandatory clerical celibacy subsequently leads to her becoming pregnant. He refuses her request to quit the priesthood to promptly formalize their relationship through marriage to save face over the scandal. He is unapologetically unprepared trade his ambition to attain the church's high hierarchy for his sexual lusts with her and told persuades her to leave the town to shield them from the imminent shame. Instead of leaving town, Amelia resolves to reunite with Reuben, her fiancé, to whom he suggests an immediate marriage, with the intention of mentioning him as responsible for the pregnancy. Reuben declines her proposal and opts out of the relationship. Afterwards, left with no option other and despite her initial opposition, she heads with Father Amaro to an illegal abortion clinic. When the procedure goes amiss, with Amelia bleeding profusely, he pulled her out of the clinic located in a jungle and heads to a hospital in a city. Amelia dies on the way there.

After news of the scandal broke, a fabricated account midwived by the church is circulated around the community to prevent tarnishing its image. The church exercises considerable control over the local newspaper and stories that can be reported about it and the pages they are published. In the aftermath, instead of Father Amaro, Rueben is accused of the impregnating and arranging the abortion that leads to Amelia's death. He instantaneously faces several retributions including public humiliation, getting fired from his job at the local newspaper, and expulsion of his membership from the church, having first lost her fiancée to a system within Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses that perpetuates the oppression of the working class or supposedly erring individuals (142).

Father Natalio is another victim of the rampant debauchery in the system. Reputed for being pious, he is kicked out of his position in the church due to his activism and take sides with left-wing radicals who are pushing for change and fighting the drug lords funding Father Benito's projects in a community where every day is a struggle for survival. His dismissal accentuates corruption and the abuse of entrusted power for personal profit in the system. Father Benito, on the other hand, is unstoppable in his track, maintaining his longtime illicit relationship with the eatery owner and accepting fouled drug money in the guise of alms to the church. What makes his case interesting is that he has the support of the church bishop and the town mayor.

The plight of Amelia in the story is equally instructive in the way the capitalist system takes advantage of the masses to thrive. She becomes the sacrificial lamb for Father Amaro to attain the lofty position he desperately craves. After her burial, Father Amaro is elevated to the next hierarchical level of the church, purportedly for his spirited effort to save errant Amelia after the complications from her abortion which claimed her life and her unborn child.

The Crime of Father Amaro is a powerful indictment of religion as an appendage of the capitalist machinery. It evokes religion as a social construct that money is made off from and rather than improve the providences of the subjects, enchain them. The film, therefore, glosses over the pseudo-righteousness of church leadership and provides a wakeup call to put religion on scrutiny as a conduit for corrupt and dubious practices that make it thrive and to continually place the laity – the poor masses – in manacles.

Movie Analysis - *Bread and Roses* (2000)

Bread and Roses portrays the unpleasant plight of the poorly paid janitorial workers in Angel Company, in a downtown high-rise building in Los Angeles. It highlights the workers' struggle to unionize and contest the unfair labor practices by the million-dollar company to improve their poor working conditions. From the storyline, the workers have no health insurance, paid sick days, overtime and holiday pay, job security, and other employee benefits. The plot is told through the eyes of Maya, an undocumented immigrant, who lately arrives the country through the Mexico–United States border, aided by “Coyotes.” Maya joins her sister, Rosa, who funded her passage into the country, in the company, and ends up

paying her first month's salary as kickback to Perez, the corrupt and power hungry on-site supervisor.

Soon, in the wake of the cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment meted out to her and her co-workers by Perez and the company, Maya chooses the path of social justice, acceding to the invite by Sam, an ardent labor activist and janitors' union organizer, to unionize the company. Not only do many of the workers find the path unattractive, due to the fear of being fired and deported, but also Rosa, who is apathetic about confronting the establishment which provides the financial means she uses in taking care of her ailing husband and children, and extended family in New Mexico. As arguments ensue between the siblings, Rosa schooled her sister she had had to work as a hooker to pay for her Maya's education, including laying with sleep Perez to get Rosa her job. She snaps: "I've been whoring all my life, and I'm tired," she says.

Rosa's comments momentarily dampen Maya's resolve to justice, but she refuses to give in and prevails on other courageous workers to stage several demonstrations in the face of the management's intimidation and divide and conquer tactics. In the end, the management yields a few grounds, which resonates with Gramsci's idea of workers' strength lying in collective action to get off the grip of their oppressors. Moreover, Bread and Roses establishes disunity as an endemic problem that plagues workers' unions, vis-à-vis, the working class, in their bid for freedom. The film shows how the divisions among the janitors in Angel company split them into two groups, resulting in a few of them, led by Maya and Sam, making the sacrifices that at least effected some changes in their working conditions. It draws attention to other challenges of the working-class may possibly face when they organize to fight their common enemy, such as the sellout her co-workers by Rosa to curry the favor of the management to solely attract a better pay. Her action lends to individualistic culture that is foisted by the capitalist system as against collectivistic culture, in which group goals and concord thrives and required by working class require to over the system. Overzealousness on the part of some workers may also be the pose Waterloo for successful collective action, as proven in the case of Maya robbing a convenience store to help a co-worker raise enough money for his scholarship deposit.

An important point the film underscores is that the capitalist system never forgives its defying subjects or spares the rod. For their union activism, the Angel company dismisses several workers. Maya is deported to Mexico, luckily for her, instead of being sent to jail for her thievery. Her deportation relates to Marx's ideas of alienation which is intended to set culprits on a path of oblivion.

The spate of dismissals by the company including those of the worker that gets fired for not snitching about his fellows and the old lady who forgets her glasses at home which she needs for efficient productivity considering her bad eyesight, and its resort to deportation of erring illegal worker are, for sure, a clear warning for those who are still in the system to conform to rules or else face the same consequences on the long run. The film presents a harsh reality of the lives of workers at work, striking a chord on Karl Marx's ideas of how the

capitalist class through inequality become wealthier and powerful, while the wage workers become live in destitution.

Conclusion

The capitalist system legitimizes and reproduces class inequalities. The system creates and propagates capitalist ideology and cultural goods to maintain a subservient workforce – the working class – whose labor power must be obtained for a low wage from the upper class who control the means of production. The long-drawn-out servitude of the working classes to the system reflects, false consciousness, a mistaken thinking that prevents them from perceiving the true nature of their social and economic predicaments, hence, cooperating in their own economic oppression. The paper proposes freedom for the working classes through forming alliances in pursuit of collective action and analyzing the capitalist products for embedded ideologies and rejecting and replacing them with their own.

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