

Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story*

By Joanne Laurier and David Walsh
6 October 2009

Veteran documentary filmmaker Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* sets out to examine the recent financial collapse. His aim, he suggests, is a critique of the existing economic set-up.

"This time the culprit is much bigger than General Motors, and the crime scene is wider than Flint, Michigan," observe the film's production notes, a reference to Moore's first documentary, *Roger & Me*, made twenty years ago.

The new film is Moore's fifth major documentary, three of which, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Sicko*, are among the largest-grossing non-fiction films. Moore has developed a following as a result of the concern he demonstrates for working people and their difficulties. There will no doubt be a popular response to *Capitalism*.

That a film offering a criticism of the profit system opens in nearly one thousand movie theaters in the United States is obviously an unusual and noteworthy occurrence. There is certainly a connection between this and a growing popular radicalization under conditions of economic devastation. But what is the precise connection? Moore and his greatest admirers see him as the vanguard of some oppositional movement (whose character, however, is left remarkably vague). Is this the reality?

The filmmaker maintains a certain independence from the mass media where lies and misinformation dominate. He has shown backbone on a number of occasions. *Capitalism* is concerned with nothing less than "the disastrous impact of corporate dominance on the everyday lives of Americans (and by default, the rest of the world)," according to the film's press notes. In other words, Moore comes before his audience as a political individual with something to say, and we will judge him and his film primarily in that light.

A number of elements in the film are to his credit. First, as noted above, genuine sympathy for a suffering population.

The documentary, for instance, counters the claims of the media pundits and the Obama administration that the victims of predatory lending by the banks are in part to blame for the economic collapse. Instead, Moore demonstrates how the wages, pensions and healthcare of the working class have been decimated in the last quarter century as a huge transfer of wealth to the financial elite has taken place.

Capitalism begins by facetiously comparing ancient Rome to present-day America—vast social inequality, slave labor, and a

regime that employs torture (an image of former Vice President Dick Cheney appears onscreen). The film's overall format is familiar, perhaps too familiar. Moore does the narrating, as well as the interviewing and provoking. Through the sometimes clever use of television and movie clips he makes his points and those of his talking heads.

He focuses on some of the crimes of the system. Early on in film, a family in Lexington, North Carolina, is shown videoing their own eviction by a police force that descends upon them in excessive numbers. The next scene takes place in Detroit. A carpenter is boarding up the residence of an angry and distraught family—their home of 41 years. "This is capitalism—a system of giving and taking—mostly taking," says Moore in a voice-over.

"In a country run like a corporation," other incidents are highlighted in the film:

*A disabled railway worker's family in Peoria, Illinois, lose their home of 20 years. In a further humiliation, the bank hires the family to empty and clean the foreclosed property for \$1,000.

*In December 2008, workers occupy Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago over monies owed them by a company shuttering its doors. They eventually win an average of \$6,000 per person, although the plant closes.

*Airline pilots for regional and commuter airlines make so little that they have to be warned by employers not to apply for food stamps while in uniform. The co-pilot on Continental Connection Flight 3407, which crashed in February 2009, earned a little over \$16,000 the previous year.

*Banks and corporations take out so-called "dead peasant" life insurance policies on rank-and-file employees, whose payoffs are to the companies, not the employees' surviving family members.

*Thousands of young people were unjustly incarcerated in a privatized juvenile detention center in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, on the order of two judges who were receiving millions in kickbacks from the facility's owners.

The footage of these events and the moving comments of those involved are by far the *Capitalism's* strongest features. Moore makes the legitimate point that much of the country now resembles the wretched conditions in Flint, Michigan, he documented in *Roger & Me*.

Without being unduly harsh to Moore, one must say that his

films stand out in large measure by default: because the fairly elementary truths he points out are systematically and disgracefully concealed by the news media—and Hollywood, for that matter.

But what does Moore make of these basic facts of American (and global) life? Here his severe limitations as a thinker, and an artist, present themselves. The confusion and eclecticism, of course, are not simply his, but one must say what is—that it is impossible to see one’s way out of the present crisis on the basis of his analysis.

Little is added to an understanding of the present situation by more of the usual Moore antics: putting crime scene tape around AIG’s headquarters; driving a truck up to Citibank demanding the return of public money disbursed under the federal government’s TARP plan; trying to gain entrance to the GM headquarters in Detroit—once again. The gimmick of attempting a “citizen’s arrest” of a corporate looter has worn very thin.

A few of the gags, his or other people’s, are still amusing. A mock musical appeal to tourists to visit Cleveland makes its point: “See our river that catches on fire.... It’s so polluted that all our fish have AIDS.... See the sun almost three times a year.... Buy a house for the price of a VCR.... Our main export is crippling depression.... But at least we’re not Detroit!”

The film is disjointed and jumbled. Moore has great difficulty separating the essential from the inessential. There is no shortage of social atrocities in America. The filmmaker indignantly introduces us to the “condo vultures” and “bottom feeders” who for 25 cents on the dollar grab up foreclosed properties. What does the filmmaker expect?

Too much moralizing, sentimentality, and even manipulation go on. Moore has an unpleasant tendency of letting his camera linger on the distressed faces of his social victims.

The most serious weaknesses, however, involve his continued support for the Democratic Party, and Obama, and his inability to advance any serious alternative to the capitalist system.

His film is dominated by an internal contradiction: between the harsh social facts he presents and the paltriness of his political solution. *Capitalism: A Love Story* absurdly advocates the “elimination” of the profit system at the same time as it praises one of the parties, and that party’s leading figure, who preside over that system.

While he excoriates the obviously corrupt individual Democrat (Christopher Dodd, Richard Holbrooke), he gives a platform to other of its spokespeople, especially those who posture as “populists.” For example, Rep. Marcy Kaptur of Ohio is given wide coverage in the film. Kaptur, like a Dennis Kucinich, is capable of any amount of demagoguery about Wall Street and Goldman Sachs, but she is staunchly pro-military, a protectionist, a ferocious anti-communist, and an opponent of abortion.

As for Obama, Moore is obliged to mention in passing that Goldman Sachs was the largest private contributor to his 2008

presidential campaign. Robert Rubin, Lawrence Summers and Timothy Geithner, the brain trust of Obama’s “Government Goldman,” come under fire—but without any mention of the president himself. *Capitalism* refers to events that occurred in the spring of 2009, by which time the right-wing character of the Obama administration had shown itself, both on the domestic and foreign fronts, and Moore is entirely silent on that.

He is one of those who invariably invoke Franklin D. Roosevelt as the ultimate reformer. Roosevelt, a canny representative of the American bourgeoisie, lived in another era. What remains of the Democratic Party’s legacy of social reform, particularly in the form of healthcare “reform,” is under attack today by a president whom Moore refers to as—potentially—the 21st Century Roosevelt!

The filmmaker presents himself as a kind of “Christian socialist.” He offers a forum to various bishops and priests in ravaged areas like Detroit and Chicago, where the Church plays on the misery and illusions of the some of the poorest of the poor, to pontificate about social ills. The bishop of Chicago is filmed sermonizing and giving communion to the Republic workers during their occupation.

His argument, repeated a number of times, that capitalism is “evil,” is false. It is a socio-economic system that arose under certain objective conditions and was thoroughly revolutionary and progressive in its day. The parasitic character of contemporary capitalism is bound with its historical decay, and not, in the first place, the moral depravity of its leading figures.

At the film’s climactic moment, Moore calls for the replacement of capitalism...by “democracy.” What does that mean? It means more than anything else that he hasn’t the political courage to mention socialism.

To the extent that Moore believes the ahistorical, eclectic views he espouses in *Capitalism: A Love Story*, he is deluding himself. To the extent that he attempts to sell them to a broad audience, he is deluding others.

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