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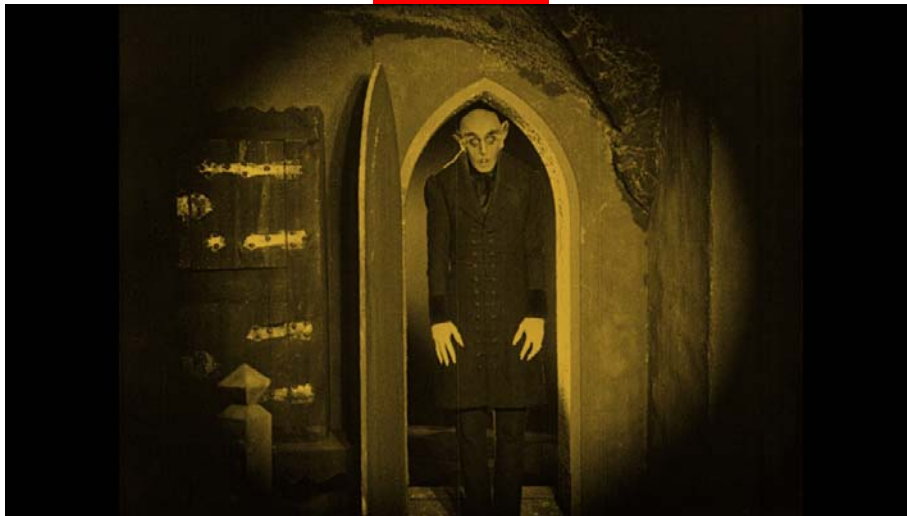
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## Fighting Oligarchy: The Idle Rich and the Vampire Economy



Still from *Nosferatu*, directed by FW Murnau.

The question of whether the United States is an oligarchy has come to the fore, as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez draw major crowds around the country to their Fighting Oligarchy Tour. Their message of combatting the outsized influence of rich and powerful corporate interests has resonated with thousands of Americans. But even as it is clear to so many that something is amiss, the idea of oligarchy can seem ill-defined and opaque. What is oligarchy in concrete terms and how would we know if we were living under one? To answer these questions requires an understanding of the relationship between the state and capital—and between both and the social body.

Martin Buber said, “The State is a homunculus sucking the blood from the veins of communities.” This picture of government as a form of parasitic subordination and control echoes several of the modern period’s most famous descriptions not only of the state, but of the role of capital within the economic order. The image of the vampire—dead yet alive, sustained by the life of humans, possessed of otherworldly power—has long been deployed as a metaphor for the capitalist. Perhaps the most famous example comes from Karl Marx, in

Volume I of *Capital*, which was first published in 1867. Marx writes, “Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” Later, he describes capital’s “vampire thirst for the living blood of labor.” In both Buber’s image of the state and Marx’s conception of capital, we find the idea of a ruling class that does not need to produce in order to live, but enjoys a privileged position to live off of the work and wealth of others. Marx relies frequently and to dramatic effect on the image of vampires and bloodthirst, for example writing that the “capitalized blood of children” underwrites the power of American capital. But Marx’s was not the first time the owning and employing class had been compared to the undead blood-suckers of folklore.

In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, published in 1764, more than a century before *Capital*, Voltaire wrote, “We never heard a word of vampires in London, nor even at Paris. I confess that in both these cities there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces.”

A more immediate reference point for Marx’s use of the metaphor comes from his friend and frequent collaborator Frederick Engels. The vampire appears in Engels’ 1845 book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, in which he discusses the role of religion in subduing the working class: “[N]ecessity will force the working-men to abandon the remnants of a belief which, as they will more and more clearly perceive, serves only to make them weak and resigned to their fate, obedient and faithful to the vampire property-holding class.” But historian of political thought William Clare Roberts argues that Marx’s use of this metaphor “may be yet another détournement of Proudhon.”

In *The System of Economic Contradictions*, Proudhon describes the employer as “like the vampire of the fable, exploiting the degraded wage-worker ... the idler devouring the substance of the laborer.” Proudhon developed the argument that it is not the abstract principle of private property that is the problem—it is rather that this legal privilege is not open and available to everyone; it therefore becomes an instrument used by a small ruling class to exclude and thus to expropriate value. Much like his American counterpart, the anarchist trailblazer Josiah Warren, Proudhon “wanted to extend to every individual the freedom exercised by the capitalists.” The challenge to the oligarchy today is Warren’s and Proudhon’s: if you believe in private property and free trade, then extend such privileges to everyone. As practiced, private property as a social relationship is profoundly freedom-limiting.

Another famous anarchist, Benjamin Tucker, said that the state “gives idle capital the power of increase, and, through interest, rent, profit, and taxes, robs industrious labor of its products.” Within the system, capital enjoys this right or power of increase, its owners’ ability to increase their wealth using their wealth, growing ever richer without work. In *Capital*, Marx observes similarly that capital “has acquired the occult quality of being able

to add value to itself.” How does capital accomplish this? In this apparently “occult” power, the mysterious ability to generate wealth from wealth, is something very real and tangible. This alchemy is achieved through a relationship between people, in which one, the superior, extracts from the other, the inferior. This is a deeply unfree relationship, within its context, but the economists provide their assurances that it is free and voluntary. Capitalism’s vampiric social relationships put one’s body at the disposal of another for the private gain of the more powerful party. This is not a purely or even primarily economic phenomenon—it is political control and confinement of the corporeal, and it requires a system of government that limits, through the force of law, the workers’ range of movement and activity in the literal sense.

The dominated worker is no longer a full human being, but an appendage of capital, an instrument in capital’s self-recreation. Capital is alive and primary, the human host a mere means. Freedom from the reign of capital thus involves the reclamation of bodily autonomy; it is a matter principally of individual freedom, the ability to direct the control of one’s physical body. Political theorist Bruno Leipold argues that “Marx’s central political value is freedom.” His book *Citizen Marx* encourages us to see Marx as first and foremost “a thinker of freedom”—freedom from arbitrary power and domination. *Citizen Marx* reconsiders Marx’s thought in light of his early Republicanism, contending that Marx is concerned with freedom as the “absence of dominating control by others,” which so pervades the modern world, but is nonetheless obscured by the liberal conception of freedom as citizenship, formal rights, and the ability to freely buy and sell within the capitalist system. The book explores at least three types of domination: there is the domination of the individual boss or capitalist, of the entire capitalist class within economic life, and of the imperatives of the capitalist market system over all of society. The formalities of liberal citizenship and legal rights serve to naturalize and neutralize these overlapping forms of domination and unfreedom.

These formalities cover and hide the character of the economic system, its compulsory limitations of movement and activity. The state-enforced immobility of labor institutes the preconditions for unequal exchange. It is worthy of note that no labor, cost, or other theory of value is necessary to achieve this relationship of inequality; it is based not on theoretical ideas about the sources of economic value, but on the actual tools of physical control. The state transfers land, gives subsidies, injects credit, guarantees loans, grants licenses and special monopolies, and holds wages down through manipulation of the labor market. Though it enjoys “relative autonomy,” the state is not neutral in class relations; at a given moment, it both represents the relationship between the ruling class and the rest of society and mediates between the ruling class and society’s lower tiers.

Within this system, true freedom cannot be described merely by pointing to formal rights. It instead requires the capacity and opportunity to act within one’s embodied life. This idea of freedom is in the direct lineage of Thomas Hodgskin’s idea of nature vs. artifice, freedom as

conceived and contemplated in the law vs. as practiced and lived. We enter the realm of true freedom only after we have left the realm of bare necessity. In Hodgskin's thought, "profit and rent were seen as legal robbery." The state (and with it legislators and laws) are responsible for the maintenance of the environment of domination and unfreedom. Exchanges of labor for pay within such an environment are not voluntary trades of equal values. Labor is sold at a discount, because other options have been foreclosed by force of law. The unequalness of the labor-for-wages exchange is the defining feature of capitalism and the wage relationship: the worker must be reconfigured, adjusted to a reality in which she is under a contractual obligation to produce more value than what she costs to the capitalist, to become something different, a host for the capitalist. This process is reinitiated and reiterated, the value generated by the worker becoming the capital that drains the life of the worker.

Within this framework, capitalists, the idle rich, are only able to profit from the labors of the industrious because they are protected by unfair advantages, embodied in law, that allow them to escape the natural outcomes and pressures of genuine, full-fledged competition. The complex of monopolistic rights and privileges both prevent labor from capitalizing on what little it does possess in the way of wealth, and allows an idle privileged class to profit without work and at no cost whatsoever. Today, the rich ruling classes are arguably more idle and socially useless than at any point in human history. Distance from political power and rapidly-growing divides of income and wealth have given rise to what is arguably the most hierarchical society in the history of the planet.

Though political scientists and journalists are paying more attention to whether the United States is an oligarchy, more scholarly attention is needed on the question of how to define and describe elite capture and control of our institutions in formal, quantitative terms. A Class Hierarchy Index might attempt to measure the degree to which power, wealth, and decision-making discretion are concentrated in a ruling class. Such an index should factor in and aggregate more specific measures such as, for example, the levels of (1) individual wealth concentration and disparity; (2) corporate consolidation and overlapping ownership interests within asset management firms and particular favored sectors; (3) funding and credit favoritism to certain firms and sectors; (4) proximity or identity of senior government officials and favored firms and sectors (a "revolving door" index); (5) sources of campaign contributions and funding; (6) policy responsiveness, as the relationship between ruling class public policy preferences and objectives and state enactments and legislation; (7) penetration of and control over elite cultural and educational institutions; and (8) land ownership concentration among states and major corporations. This is a tentative, non-exhaustive list, with some of the sub-indices overlapping one another (as well as the Cultural Uniformity Index discussed below).

Relatedly, the twenty-first century world exhibits levels of global cultural convergence and homogeneity that are without historical precedent. Scholarly efforts to quantify ruling class

power within society, in the U.S. and globally, will need a Cultural Uniformity Index, representing the extent to which the members of society share the same language, norms, and cultural beliefs and practices. Cultural uniformity is in some ways harder to probe, as it must often inquire as to the subjective values and beliefs of individuals. Still, there are several ways that we can measure this in more objective terms by examining the levels of (1) the global dominance of English as the language of commerce, culture, and higher education; (2) ownership concentration of major media outlets; (3) narrative homogeneity and standardization of news and entertainment content; (4) consumption pattern similarities and the geographic penetration of major multinational retailers of food, clothing, and household items; (5) uptake of the major social media platforms; (6) standardization of education practices, curricula, and goals (and, relatedly, the share of elite scholarship concentrated in certain Western universities and journals); (7) adoption of global model legal frameworks (for example, from international organizations like the WTO); (8) proliferation of globally recognized “best practices” for internal corporate governance; and (9) salience of universalist values shared across regions and international boundaries. Again, this is hardly a complete list and better empirical analysis will aid in the identification of cognizable domains to study and include in these indices.

Better empirical categories and grounding can help contemporary critics of oligarchy explain the unfree nature of our political and economic system: capital accumulates by dispossessing, channeling the energy and resources of others into itself in a positive feedback cycle. The current conversation about America as an oligarchy reminds us of something important: if his occult capacities are strictly imaginary, the vampire nevertheless holds real and superhuman power. As critical theory and political economy scholar Mark Neocleous points out, when Marx is discussing the exploitative forced labor imposed by the Wallachian boyars, he is talking about “none other than Vlad the Impaler: Vlad Dracula.” The thinkers discussed here knew that governmental power and economic power are connected. They understood that, its relative autonomy notwithstanding, the state reflects and reinforces society’s class dynamics. When we see that with clarity and empirical grounding, we will understand the mechanism of domination, and we will finally be able to stop its gears.

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