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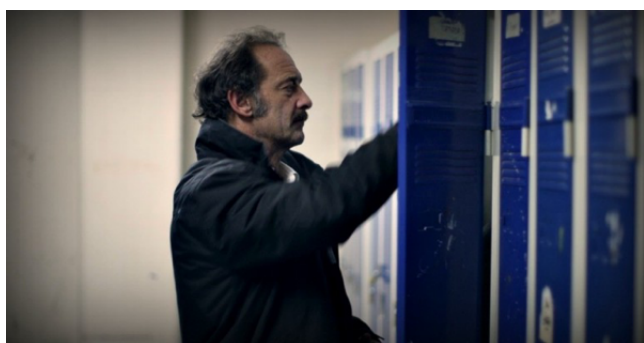
The Law of Capital: *The Measure of a Man*



By **Sérgio Dias Branco.**

Thierry Taugourdeau, factory worker, was fired along with more than 750 of his colleagues. He is 51 years old and has been unemployed for almost two. In the first scene of *The Measure of a Man* (*La Loi du marché*, 2015; “The Law of the Market” in

a literal translation), a job center assistant is in front of him. The assistant questions him about the fact that he was trained as a construction crane operator without any possibility of finding a job at the end of this process. Both he and twelve other unemployed, many of them young, did not have the experience required by the employer. The succession of training programs and internships seem to feed from one into another. In the end, he always ends up out of work and apparently at a dead end. The above-mentioned scene announces the tone of the film: the camera invites the spectator to attentively listen, continuously recording a conversation that becomes more and more intense, but without dramatic excesses, never showing the two characters at the same time on screen. When the camera pans from one to the other it is the distance between them that stands out and gives resonance to Thierry’s helplessness — interrupted when speaking, his indignation ignored.



This realism that undeviatingly concentrates on suffering faces, on modulated voices, on tense bodies, finds its main focus with French actor Vincent Lindon, winner of the Best Actor Award at the Cannes Film Festival and the César Award in the same category. His sadness is the dramatic expression of the crushing of people who live off their work and who have lost their livelihood. The law of the capitalist labor market alluded to in the

original title strikes him down, time after time, humiliation after humiliation, in a gradual and placid mechanism of submission. An interview via Skype proves to be a vexatious waste of time. The attempt to sell a family caravan is not carried through because the buyer wants to negotiate a much lower price than what had been agreed upon. A workshop for the development of his abilities as a job candidate subjects him to the negative feedback of those who are in the same situation as him and have accepted fierce competition as a principle. Too old, without the necessary qualifications and skills, forced to adopt a mechanical behavior in order to be successful, everything he does seems inadequate.

In the midst of these trials, Thierry shares moments of laughter and dance with his wife and autistic child. The unemployment benefit he receives is not enough to cover living costs, particularly those related with the health care that his son needs. At the bank, he is told to sell the house or purchase life insurance. Affected by the fatigue of an arduous life with no solution, he tells his union friends that he does not want to participate in a case against their former employers, so that he does not have to relive the struggle he put up and keeps his sanity. He is a man on the verge of collapse, and does not lose firmness or constancy in his misfortune.



When Thierry decides to ask for a small loan, he already has a job as a security guard in a supermarket. Increasingly quiet and introverted, he is assigned the task of surveilling not only the customers, but also the cashiers. The monitoring of other people raises moral dilemmas for him that continues to increase until they intersect with the tragic outcome of one of the episodes. Some of the

people who commit petty theft cannot afford to buy the products. The colleagues who handle the cash registers are caught holding on to coupons and collecting points and it is clear that they do it because of their low wages, which are similar to his. Thus, he is placed by the employer in the role of spy of other workers and participant in their dismissal. The agents of capital who run this business address everyone as if they formed a team of equals, but put workers against workers, break their solidarity, and mask their exploitation. Thierry will have to choose whether to remain associated with this inhuman treatment or to return to an anguished job search.

The Measure of a Man, directed by Stéphane Brizé, portrays the problems of the contemporary labor world without yielding to the rhetoric of a message. As in *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux jours, une nuit*, 2014), it is through the characters, their difficulties and aspirations, joys and frustrations, that the film builds an accurate representation of the economic and social relations in capitalism, aggravated by the neoliberal offensive. What Friedrich Engels wrote in a letter to Minna Kautsky in 1885 applies to these films. The subject of his commentary was the so-called social novel that, according to him, “fully carries out its mission if by a faithful portrayal of the real conditions it dispels the dominant conventional illusions concerning them, shakes the optimism of the bourgeois world, and inevitably instils doubt as to the eternal validity of that which exists, without itself offering a direct solution of the problem involved, even without at times ostensibly taking sides.”¹ Of course, the questions and demands for responses that a powerful film such as this, “a faithful portrayal of the real conditions”, originates can lead us to take sides, which is exactly the implication of Engels’s remarks.

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¹Friedrich Engels, “Engels to Minna Kautsky,” *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 88.