

Article

## **PLAYDOUGH CAPITALISM: AN ADVENTURE IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

**WILLIAM K. CARROLL**

Department of Sociology, University of Victoria

[wcarroll@uvic.ca](mailto:wcarroll@uvic.ca)

### **Abstract**

This paper describes a technique for simulating capitalism within the classroom, using familiar materials and creating a participatory, reflexive learning space. It situates 'Playdough Capitalism' within the theory/practice of experiential education/radical pedagogy and the Marxist analysis/immanent critique of capitalism as a historically-formed system of class exploitation and alienated labour. The paper discusses both the value of simulating capitalism within the classroom and its limits as a transformative pedagogy.

### **Keywords**

Capitalism, experiential education, immanent critique, radical pedagogy, surplus value

### **Introduction**

Over the last couple of decades, I have taught an upper-year undergraduate course on the political economy of corporate capitalism. The readings and themes have evolved over time, but the course has always been a venue for introducing sociology students to Marxist analysis of capitalism. Although with retirements and new appointments the Cold War anti-communism, still prevalent in Sociology at the University of Victoria when I joined the department in the early 1980s, has gradually dissipated, historical materialism remains a fairly marginal perspective in our undergraduate curriculum. The corporate capitalism course attracts students from other programs, such as Political Science and Social Justice Studies, some of whom are grounded in Marxism, but most of the 30-40 students who sign up for the course have little to no acquaintance with Marx's analysis of capitalism as a mode of production. A good proportion of the class have directly experienced various forms of wage labour, and with the incremental withdrawal of student aid and the doubling of tuition in the first years (2001-2004) of British Columbia's hard-right Liberal government, it has been common for students to work part

time, and thus to experience the contradictions of semi-proletarianization. Many of them are hungry for a critical perspective that can take them beyond the horizons of a moralizing condemnation of corporate monopoly power and middle-class 'privilege', and of the alienating experiences of rampant consumerism, 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer 2011) and competitive individualism – all of which I use as entry points in the course.

In creating a small-scale version of capitalism within the classroom, the simulation I describe below offers a 'demonstration' of several ideas at the heart of Marx's critical analysis of capitalism – in particular, the appropriation of surplus value, but also the alienation of wage labour, the fetishism of commodities and the immanent critique of liberal ideology. 'Playdough Capitalism' is an adventure in experiential education, through which students learn through participation in (and reflection upon) practices that reach beyond texts and lectures.

Of course, in taking up Marx's perspective on capitalism, there is no substitute for engagement with relevant literature. This can very well include accessible classics such as Marx's (1898 [1865]) 'Value, Price and Profit', although for some students the academic veneration that is always implicit in resort to such works can itself pose a barrier. 'Why are we reading a dusty text from a century and a half ago to understand today's world?' they ask; 'is there nothing more current? Does Marxism begin and end with Marx?' My own strategy at the undergraduate level is to expose students to more recent social-science texts, such as James O'Connor's (1974) 'The theory of surplus value' and Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho's *Marx's Capital* (2010). Literary works can also be of great help. Wallace Shawn incorporated an illuminating account of commodity fetishism into his one-person play, *The Fever*, which strikes a poetic note and includes a reflection on how difficult it is (without being politically active) to maintain a critical stance on capitalism, as everyday life in market society makes commodity fetishism common sense:

This coat, this sweater, this cup of coffee: each thing worth some quantity of money, or some number of other things — one coat, worth three sweaters, or so much money — as if that coat, suddenly appearing on the earth, contained somewhere inside itself an amount of value, like an inner soul, as if the coat were a fetish, a physical object that contains a living spirit. But what really determines the value of a coat? The coat's price comes from its history, the history of all the people involved in making it and selling it and all the particular relationships they had. And if we buy the coat, we, too, form relationships with all those people, and yet we hide those relationships from our own awareness by pretending we live in a world where coats have no history but just fall down from heaven with prices marked inside.... For two days I could see the fetishism of commodities everywhere around me. It was a strange feeling. Then on the

third day I lost it, it was gone, I couldn't see it anymore. (Shawn 1991, unpaginated).

A pedagogical advantage in texts such as Shawn's is that they operate in part at an 'experiential' level, inviting the reader to participate in a first-person narrative. Often it is assumed that deep and complex theoretical ideas must be engaged abstractly – as in the Althusserian notion of a 'theoretical practice' that appropriates as its raw material 'an abstract conceptual representation of the real object', and converts these into theory (Smith 1980, 61). Without denying the need for abstraction, my approach here assumes that 'even some of the most abstract concepts may be illustrated through aptly designed experiences' (Blenkinsop and Beeman 2012, 112). The pedagogical implication is important: 'often students who have no interest in theoretical ideas will entertain them if there is an engaging experience that serves as an entry point for understanding' (ibid).

### **Experiential Education, Radical Pedagogy and Classroom Simulation**

Experiential education can be defined as 'a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values' (Breunig 2005, 108). Breunig notes an important convergence between experiential education and critical pedagogy, both of which 'conceive of teaching, learning, and the project of schooling in ways that focus teaching on the development of a moral project(s) for education as social transformation' (2005, 112). Realizing the promises of both requires educators to turn pedagogical theory into 'purposeful classroom practices' (2005, 111).

Playdough capitalism offers one instance of this theory-practice transference, invoking as its moral project Marx's immanent critique of liberal ideology. In *Capital* Marx shows how the celebrated values of liberalism – freedom and equality – while consistent with the rules of the marketplace, are fundamentally at odds with how capitalism works at a deeper level of production. In Marx's own account, the sphere of commodity circulation comprises

...a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham,

because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all (Marx 1887 [1867], Chapter 6, paragraph 19).

By bringing the rudiments of Marx's analysis to life in the classroom, Playdough Capitalism draws students into an analysis of capitalism that is also an ideology-critique, seeking, as Susan Marks explains, 'to push the world to live up to its own professed standards' (2001: 115). As a moral project, such immanent critique eschews the arrogance of an external standpoint, but also the complicity of ideology's internal self-understanding. Its goal is to show how that self-understanding 'strains at its own limitations', pointing beyond itself. The first step 'is to make more transparent the processes by which social inequalities are masked, naturalized, rationalized and otherwise legitimated' (Marks 2001, 115). This concentrates attention on the reality of inequalities, but also their historicity and contingency, and on the gap between them and the liberal ideals that are supposed to animate our social and political arrangements. The effect is to unsettle the imaginative hold of the arrangements themselves, stimulating reflection on the untapped potential within the ideals of freedom and equality. *Self-reflection* is thus the goal of immanent critique:

...to engage people in a process of reflecting on their own circumstances. To make us see our own circumstances in a new way is already to change us, already to bring about a kind of emancipation. But ideology critique can also be emancipatory in the further sense that it can motivate us to act on our altered understanding. How so? Because the critique of ideology invites us to consider, on the one hand, the possibility that we make ourselves accomplices to oppression (including that of which we are ourselves the victims). On the other hand, it invites us to consider the possibility that we have at our disposal weapons for resisting oppression, if only we would use them as such (Marks 2001, 115-116).

Critical self-reflection and the transformation of social relations have been core concerns of radical pedagogy, from its inception, and the 'problem-posing' approach that Freire (1970) advocated is evident in Marx's own exposition in *Capital*, which poses and then unravels the paradox of a class society that celebrates freedom and equality as

universals. Where playdough capitalism, and Freire, differ from traditional academic approaches to reading *Capital*, is in the participatory, experiential mode of student engagement with the theory, which subverts and problematizes elements of class that are imported as hidden curriculum into the classroom. 'Problem-posing education counters the hierarchical nature of "banking" education by suggesting that education should be cointentional, involving both teachers and students as subjects. Through dialogue new relationships emerge, that of teacher-student and student-teacher' (Freire 1970, 80).

Among the variety of experiential exercises discussed by Cramer et al (2012, 2), Playdough Capitalism exemplifies the 'experiencing' mode: it gives students 'an opportunity to actually take on a disadvantaged or discriminated role and experience life from the viewpoint of an oppressed population.' It constructs, within the classroom, a miniature capitalism using familiar materials and involving students themselves as proletarian participants. Simultaneously, it complements this 'direct' (though simulated) experience of the proletarian with a demonstration of how the economic surplus is produced, appropriated and accumulated within capitalism as a social form, enabling students to 'see' how capitalism works both from the subjective side of typified proletarian experience and from the objective side of political economy. Playdough capitalism has been an important part of my course on corporate capitalism for more than two decades, but the basic exercise can be found in Robert Tressell's novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1965 [1914]) – in the chapter entitled 'The great money-trick'. There, Tressell's protagonist, Owen, creates a simulation of capitalism with his workmates, using knives as instruments of production, slices of bread as raw material and half-pennies as currency. This chapter was included by Bertell Ollman (1978) in his collection, with Theodore Mills, *Studies in Socialist Pedagogy*, as an appendix to his essay 'On teaching Marxism' (Ollman 1978, 215-53), in which he described Tressell's money-trick as 'the most successful teaching device I have ever used' (1978, 226).

### **Playdough Capitalism in Practice**

Playdough Capitalism employs the same basic devices of analytical abstraction as Tressell and Ollman. However, it incorporates into the simulated capitalist micro-world a more realistic representation of industrial capital and commercial capital and of what Marx called the 'metamorphosis of value' within capitalism's circuitry, across productive, commercial and money forms. By including a production process with a division of labour, a store, money and a segmentation of time into that devoted to producing commodities and that devoted to reproducing labour power, the simulation models the actualities of capitalism while keeping the focus on the alienation of labour, the production and realization of surplus value, and the basic relationship between labour and capital. It is a fully *reflexive* exercise, which presents, in advance, both the premises

of capitalism and the logic of simulation as a means of analytical abstraction through which participants can experience the essence of the social system under scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the simulation opens a space not only for substantive analysis and critique but for a methodological discussion of the use of abstraction in social science, developing the key distinction Marx (1973 [1858]) makes in the *Grundrisse* between rational abstractions that penetrate beneath surface appearances of social reality while retaining a sense of historicity, and chaotic conceptions that organize knowledge on the basis of superficial similarities and differences, with little regard for historical specificity.

With this in mind, I devote the first part of the session to making explicit the analytical abstractions according to which capitalism is to be simulated in the classroom. The basic points are provided to students in a double-sided one-page handout, to which I refer in my own orienting remarks (see Appendix 1). Three theoretical distinctions, which also form the premises of capitalism, are made: 1/ between 'free' wage-labour and capital, 2/ among three forms of capital (industrial capital, merchant capital and money-capital) and 3/ between the mode of production and a rudimentary state apparatus. After pointing out that these premises arose historically in what Marx called a process of primitive accumulation, I discuss how the simulation models capitalism as a self-reproducing system. The working class consists of three student volunteers; the course director stands in for the entire capitalist class; the means of production are comprised of playdough, a rolling pin, bread knife and molds, all set out on a table representing a factory owned by the capitalist; money capital consists of a supply of paper clips owned initially by the capitalist, the currency of the economy; merchant capital is centralized into one store (also owned by the capitalist) which sells commodities produced at the factory; the state is represented as a student volunteer hired by the capitalist as police officer to keep order and protect private property from possible incursion (for more details see Appendix 1).

Having walked the students through the component parts of the system, the final step before we set it in motion involves explanation of three further features of capitalism that are incorporated into the simulation. The first of these is the temporal division between work time and leisure time. The working day is set to one minute, after which there is a one-minute leisure period; so two minutes represents 24 hours, with the working day taking 12 hours. The second is the phenomenon of exchange value. Capitalism requires definite ratios at which commodities can be exchanged, with money expressing the exchange value of each commodity. The exchange value of labour power,

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, postmodernists delivered a critique of essentialism in discourse that is sometimes overgeneralized to rule out any critical analysis of how a historically-specifically social form is constituted and reproduced in practice. By essence, I mean precisely the historically formed social relations that make capitalism what it is, underneath the surface features of freedom in the marketplace and equality in exchange (also aspects of capitalism) that are celebrated within liberal ideology.

capital's all-important commodity – the wage – is set at two paper clips per day, and workers will be entitled to spend their wages in their free time, which from the system's perspective is a time for reproducing labour power so that it can be sold anew. Finally, the simulation models two types of industrially-produced commodities: subsistence goods (represented as playdough stars) and luxury goods (represented as angels, which take longer to produce). The initial price of one star is two paper clips; the initial price of one angel is four paper clips. In this simplified world, I point out, human subsistence requires the consumption of at least one star per day – thus workers receive a subsistence wage that enables them to reproduce their labour power.

These reflexive preliminaries lay out the logic of the simulation (and of capitalism) in advance, so students have the conceptual tools at the front of their consciousness as the simulation plays out. I set up a table, facing the class (who sit in a semi-circle, around it), and place the playdough, rolling pin, molds and butter knife in a row, prefiguring what will be the flow of the labour process. A few steps away, typically on a lectern (or whatever surface is available), I place a little hand-lettered sign that reads: **\$store**, and a small box of paper clips. The table and lectern are the places for production and circulation. Trading on my authority as professor, I assume the role of the 'collective capitalist', recruit three student-proletarians, assign them to their respective places on the production line, and briefly explain the colour of the playdough (for recipe see Appendix 2). Bright green, it symbolizes capital's new-found dedication to ecological sustainability, a play on words that typically elicits giggles and groans. As a final step before beginning the first working day, I 'hire' a student volunteer to serve as police officer (to be paid the same wage as the factory workers).

Volunteers readily take up their assigned roles in the division of labour (roller, molder, trimmer/quality control) and often with great zest. Generally, the police officer has nothing to do (my authority is sufficient to contain things within system norms). Near the end of each working day, I have the workers deliver what they have produced to the store, at which point I pay them in paper clips. In their one minute of 'free time', they must purchase what they need to subsist, and since a star is all they can afford, the consumer choice amounts to a comparison of the nearly identical commodities they produced earlier. As the collective capitalist, I also consume commodities, but in greater quantity and quality (stars and angels). Having established the 'green' credentials of this economy, all of the commodities that are consumed in the leisure period are simply 'recycled' into the mound of playdough, to be worked up into fresh commodities later.

As each working day goes by, the workers develop more efficient ways of molding the playdough into stars and angels, increasing the productivity of their labour. I play the role of facilitator-coach – never getting involved in actual production, but exhorting the workers to 'give it their all' and introducing other clichés that inject humour but also replicate the voice of management within the factory. Yet as output rises while wages

remain stagnant, sometimes the workers organize a resistance – e.g., a slowdown, or even a union to bargain collectively; perhaps a strike. In the fluid circumstances, I, as capitalist class, respond either with the carrot or stick, and typically the latter: I will fire the most militant of the workers and replace her or him with another student-proletarian, recruited from the reserve army of spectators. Or I will dock pay. These dramatic acts may provoke a response ‘from below’, or not. In either case, they become grist for the mill of post-simulation discussion.

The simulation creates a very dramatic visual effect, at odds with commodity fetishism. Over the course of several working days, the workers produce far more than they consume via their wages: the exchange value of their labour-power being far less than the quantity of new value they create. Even my own more profligate consumption of both stars and angels does not prevent a mass of commodities from piling up. The links between the creative agency of the workers, operating collectively in the factory, the wealth produced by them, the appropriation of that wealth at the end of each working day by the capitalist, and the consequent accumulation of wealth under control of the capitalist class are crystal clear. This clarity issues from the key abstraction on which the simulation depends: *the bracketing of inter-capitalist competition*, and indeed of markets as a panoply of relations of circulation. As collective capitalist, I personify (as Marx would put it) the entire capital under the control of the capitalist class; thus instead of a ‘market system’ within which individual members of the bourgeoisie compete for shares of the total surplus value and collaterally offer employment to workers, the capital-labour relation is shown to be a mechanism for pumping unpaid surplus-labour out of the direct producers (Marx 1999 [1894], paragraph 10). The appropriateness of such an abstraction is grist for the mill during the extensive post-simulation debrief and discussion. But the simulation itself provides experiential support for Marx’s approach, demonstrating how new value issues from human agency in the labour process. After all, in a market system one capitalist might through *virtu* or *fortuna* (or malice) reap a (surplus) profit at the expense of competitors, but the entire surplus claimed by the capitalist class cannot originate in the zero-sum game of inter-capitalist competition.

At this point in the exercise, one can either move into the post-simulation discussion, or (time permitting) introduce some variations into the scenario. On various occasions, I have

1. increased the length of the working day and thus the amount of absolute surplus value appropriated by capital from labour;
2. introduced a wage increase, which reduces surplus value and thus slows down the rate at which capitalist wealth grows;
3. hired a manager, paid double the wage of the industrial workers, to squeeze more labour out of them while relieving me of any involvement in production; and



4. introduced technology that increases relative surplus value by boosting labour productivity (e.g., beginning the simulation without the rolling pin, and introducing it after several working days).

In combination the last three variations take us closer to the post-World War Two regime of technocratic consumer capitalism.

The simulation could be made even more elaborate and concrete, e.g., by introducing multiple sites of production (perhaps ‘North’ and ‘South’, with different wage rates), or even inter-capitalist competition. One might also see what happens when the cash nexus (merchant capital, money) is eliminated completely. Instead of receiving wages and buying back some of what they have produced, student-producers might be allowed to keep some of what they produce but obliged to forfeit the rest, say as rent-in-kind (roughly, feudal relations). Alternatively, one could recompose the relations of production so that student-producers give up their entire product to the dominant class, receiving subsistence back directly (roughly, slavery). Playing with these more ambitious scenarios would require more time; perhaps a half-day workshop.

Playdough capitalism is an open-ended adventure, which raises the question of how to bring the simulation to a ‘conclusion’. On occasion, I have created an ending by pointing to the over-accumulation of commodities controlled by the capitalist class and declaring that there has been a global crisis of overproduction, requiring me, as the collective capitalist, to fire my workforce, and thus to end the simulation. (This is close to what Tressell does in his original, fictional version.) To date, no episode has ended in socialist revolution, which would require the student-proletarians, presumably with the support of the police, to re-appropriate the wealth they have produced and to place it under public control. To be fair to them, the cards are especially stacked against the proletariat in this simulation. Revolutions take more than a few super-compressed working days to gestate, and the various objects mobilized in the simulation do not lend themselves to the transformations that are part of revolutionary restructuring of a mode of production. Of course, these considerations are also grist for the discussion mill that follows from the simulation.

I have also used this simulation in classes I give within UNI 102, a free, non-credit introduction to the social sciences designed for people who experience barriers to entering university, typically due to poverty. Part of UVic’s ‘community engagement’, UNI 102 attracts a student body that is less instrumental, older, and more engaged and worldly than most undergraduate students I teach. But the simulation is no less successful and relevant; indeed, UNI 102 students are often able to bring a great wealth of practical experience to the session. On one memorable occasion, the student-proletarian whose job was to flatten playdough with a rolling pin responded to my commands to work faster by slamming his tool on the table, breaking it into three pieces. The simulation came to an

abrupt end, and we had much to talk about, including the legacy of the Luddites and, more broadly, the fact that it is living labour that produces capital, as its alienated product. This is, of course, one ‘proof’ of the labour theory of value: when labour withdraws from production, new value ceases to appear (O’Connor 1974).

### Reflective Debriefing and Discussion

A crucial part of this adventure in experiential learning comes in the post-simulation session, when we return to a reflexive voice, now in a more dialogical mode, beginning with participants’ observations and reflections – recalling thoughts and feelings that came up during the exercise and reflecting on the implications for how we understand capitalism as a political-economic system. We use these experiential reflections as entry points for revisiting some of the more analytical issues that are framed by such critical concepts as surplus value and exploitation, alienated labour, commodity fetishism and the critique of liberal ideology. Comparisons between Playdough Capitalism and the ‘real thing’ provide fertile ground for articulating a Marxian analysis of capitalism with a range of important issues, such as liberal-democratic governance, ideologies of consumerism and nationalism, and the gendered reproduction of labour power (see Appendix 1 for details). A key difference between the simulation and the real thing, worth emphasizing in the discussion, is that in capitalism most surplus value is reinvested, which is what makes it capital (self-expanding value), and what causes capitalism to reproduce itself, inexorably, on an extended scale. In the simulation, most of the surplus product is hoarded in commodity form without being realized as surplus value, let alone capitalized. Such hoarding is a practice Marx characterized as ‘tomfoolery’, within a capitalist order.<sup>2</sup> Although this is another limitation of the simulation, bringing it up enables the class to consider capitalism’s dynamic of endless growth, which is so patently at odds with ecosystem vitality today (Kovel 2007). The post-simulation is also furnishes an opportunity to compare hierarchy and authority in the classroom with the workplace, particularly in light of how easily the authority of a professor morphs into that of the capitalist – suggesting that, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) and others have argued, the structural isomorphism between education and the workplace helps prepare the next generation for life within capitalism.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Exclusion of money from circulation would also exclude absolutely its self-expansion as capital, while accumulation of a hoard in the shape of commodities would be sheer tomfoolery’ (Marx 1887, chapter 24, section 2, paragraph 2).

## Conclusion

What Playdough Capitalism does is to create an experiential ‘learning space’, within the classroom, for action and reflection, feeling and thinking and conversational learning about class and capitalism. As Kolb and Kolb point out, ‘the enhancement of experiential learning in higher education can be achieved through the creation of learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learners’ (2005, 205). For students the exercise is illuminating, sometimes startlingly so. But ‘the connection between insight and action’ is not automatic (Kohn 2009, unpaginated). A student’s direct or vicarious participation in a simulation of capitalism does NOT imply a take-up of radical or resistant practice outside the classroom.

Our exercise does not escape the limits of in-class simulation, and of classroom learning more generally. Recalling Wallace Shawn’s character in *The Fever*, unless people incorporate a kind of anti-capitalist resistance into their lives, the dull compulsion of economic relations under capitalism tends to induce commodity fetishism, even after one has absorbed the insights of Marxist analysis. As Marx himself observed, ‘the advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature’ (1887 [1867], Chapter 28, paragraph 11). Given this, radical education needs to go beyond the critique of capitalist production, to help engender an alternative production processes that put *people*, rather than commodities, in motion, that produce *new people*, ‘transforming them into people with a new conception of themselves – as subjects capable of altering their world’ (Lebowitz 2009, 316). Otherwise workers (the class destination of most of the students we teach) simply play their part in reproducing capitalism’s social relations.

A related limit stems from the challenges recent cultural developments pose for the method of immanent critique. Operating within a critical-modernist problematic, the latter ‘highlights the tension between norms such as freedom and equality and the actual practices that these norms legitimize’ (Kohn 2009, unpaginated). But what if the ethical hold of the liberal ideal has itself weakened? Students who position themselves instrumentally as consumer/investors – purchasers of an educational credential, an investment in human capital – may be largely immune to the critical-modernist strategy of immanent critique. They may draw quite different practical lessons from Playdough Capitalism, lessons consistent with what Slavoj Žižek has called ‘cynical reason’, according to which ‘one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it’ (1989, 29). For the cynic, a demonstration that capitalism’s celebration of freedom and equality in the market obscures deeper truths of alienation and exploitation might simply provide more strategic ammunition in the struggle for individual advantage.

These limitations point up the need to situate this classroom exercise (and our other teaching initiatives) within a broader ethico-political critique of capitalism and of interlinked forms of domination, and to encourage students to carry the insights they achieve in the classroom into the field of activism.

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## Appendix 1: handout to accompany the in-class simulation Playdough Capitalism

### *Premises of Capitalism as a System*

1. Labour: a class of free wage workers, “free in the double sense”
2. Capital: in three forms
  - a. Industrial capital: capitalist control of the means of production
  - b. Money capital: a fund of money with which capital can make necessary purchases
  - c. Commercial capital: businesses engaged in sales to consumers but not production.

In addition, a rudimentary state (namely a police officer) is required to enforce property rights.

### *Modeling Capitalism as a System*

All simulations involve abstraction from a complex reality. What gets abstracted are the essential features of the system being simulated. We construct a working model, set it in motion, and see what happens. In this simulation, we make various simplifications so that the system can be modeled on the smallest possible scale, in a classroom, and in a short time frame.

- The **working class** consists of three student volunteers, although other students should consider themselves available to work — members of a “reserve army of labour.”
- The **capitalist class** consists of a single person — the course director.
- The **means of production** consists of playdough as raw material that is worked up into finished goods, a rolling pin, molds and a bread knife, all within a single factory.
- **Money capital** consists initially of a supply of paper clips, the currency of the economy, possessed by the capitalist class as a means of purchase.
- **Commerce** is entirely centralized into one store (also owned by the capitalist class) which sells commodities produced at the factory.
- Since the capitalist class takes the form of a single agent controlling industrial, commercial and money capital, this could be thought of as an extreme form of monopoly capitalism, in which **one capitalist empire dominates the entire economy**.
- Although liberal democracy is typical of capitalism, this simulation is a **police state**. The capitalist class hires a police officer to keep order and protect private

- property from possible incursion.
- The simulation requires us to move through a series of production/consumption periods. To do this we will set the *working day* as one minute long and the *leisure period* as one minute long; in effect two minutes represents 24 hours, and the working day is 12 hours long.
  - Capitalism requires definite, though changing, ratios at which commodities can be exchanged (*prices*), with money as the mediator that expresses the exchange value of each commodity. The price of labour power, capital's all-important commodity, is the *wage*. For this simulation, wages will be set at two paper clips per day, and workers will be entitled to spend their wages in their free time, which from the system's perspective is a time for reproducing labour power so that it can be sold anew.
  - Capitalism generates several kinds of commodities — subsistence goods (for reproducing labour power; e.g., food, shelter, clothing), luxury goods (for consumption by the capitalist class) and capital goods (fresh means of production). In our simulation we will not produce the third category. *Subsistence goods* will be represented as stars; *luxury goods* will be represented as angels. The initial price of one star is two paper clips; the initial price of one angel is four paper clips. In this simplified world, *human subsistence requires the consumption of at least one star per day*.

### *Step 1: Getting the accumulation process underway*

We will run several cycles (days), each two minutes long. Workers are directly supervised by the capitalist class, which thus wields direct control over the labour process. Think about the operative elements in the situation, influencing the creation of wealth and its apportionment between the two classes. Also think about class interests — in what ways do they converge and in what ways do they conflict?

### *Step 2: Some variations*

Simulation enables us to explore the impact of the introduction of change to one or another parameter in the system. Some basic parameters in a capitalist system, relevant to this simulation, are the *price of commodities* -- particularly the wage rate — and the *productivity of labour* (which depends in part on the use of labour-saving technologies). Other factors, such as the extent to which workers are organized vs. atomized and the effectiveness of the state in maintaining social control, could also be made to vary by the actions of participants in the simulation. In this step we observe what happens to the production and distribution of wealth and to the balance of class forces when some of the

parameters change.

### **Step 3: Analysis**

We begin the analysis by hearing from each of the participants. Please reflect on ***how your position in the political-economic structure may have shaped your consciousness and action***. Were there any moments when you experienced an ‘Ah-ha’, when you saw more clearly than before what lies underneath a capitalist order?

One of the basic illustrative aspects of this simulation has to do with the capitalist appropriation of surplus value — the new wealth that results from workers’ agency in production but that is claimed by the capitalist, as profit — a form of alienated labour. Under capitalism, surplus value is produced in two ways: 1/ as ***absolute surplus value***, by sweating more labour out of the workforce or by lowering the wage rate; and 2/ as ***relative surplus value***, by raising labour productivity (usually through new technology, work reorganization and economies of scale) so that the same quantity of living labour produces more commodities. How do these concepts of absolute and relative surplus value figure in the simulation?

Of course, increasing the rate of surplus value (the ratio: [surplus value appropriated]/[wages paid]) is a crucial means of increasing the rate of profit, which is each capitalist’s prime motive. This rate is also known as the rate of exploitation. Characteristically, workers defend their conditions of life and resist capitalist attempts to increase the rate of exploitation. This is a basic aspect of class struggle in a capitalist society. How did it play out in the simulation?

Finally, an important issue concerns ***the departures we have made from reality***.

- By *abstracting* from market relations, by aggregating all capitalists into one, we eliminate inter-capitalist competition: the struggle among capitalists for relative shares of the surplus value appropriated from workers. The simulation enables us to see class appropriation of wealth for what it is, and to understand how capitalism generates enormous material inequities — its characteristic pattern of mass poverty and opulent wealth.
- By the same token, by abstracting from the market the simulation subverts a pillar of liberal ideology: the celebration of freedom of choice and equality of exchange in the marketplace. These values are reversed in the sphere of capitalist production, where labour is alienated and exploited.

But what about other simplifying assumptions, including the representation of the state



as a police officer?

- The simulation does not represent any element of liberal-democratic governance, social programs that might effect a ‘class compromise’, nor ideologies such as consumerism and nationalism.
- It does not represent a key dynamic of capitalism: its logic of endless growth as surplus value is plowed back into new investment – causing capitalism to be reproduced on an ever-extended scale, and in our era, provoking a deepening ecological crisis.
- It does not represent spatialized divisions within capitalism – between states, between the regions such as the global North and South.
- It does not attempt to model the complex practices through which workers’ labour power is actually reproduced, particularly within gendered relations.

What are the implications of re-introducing these elements into our analysis? How are capitalism’s class contradictions modified or displaced by such complexities? These are big questions we can only begin to address in class, but they are worth pondering.

## **Appendix 2: Recipe for stovetop playdough**

1 c. flour

1/4 c. salt

2 tbsp. cream of tartar

*Combine and add:*

1 c water

2 tsp. veg. food colouring

1 tbsp. oil

*Cook over medium heat and stir (3-5 minutes). When it forms a ball in the centre of the pot, turn it out and knead.*

Store in a plastic bag.

(Thanks to Janet Laxton for this recipe.)