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## Anti-Capitalist Ideologies Uncovered in the Marxist Analysis of Hwang Dong-hyuk's Netflix Original Squid Game (2021)

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### **Abstract**

Through a Marxist analytical lens, this research presents a critical examination of Hwang Dong-hyuk's Netflix Original *Squid Game* (2021) with an objective to expose the major liabilities of a modern capitalist model by first providing context and a framework of Marxist analysis, followed by a discussion of the media form itself, the illusion of freedom, and elements of dehumanization and violence, as well as the rapacious urgency of supply and demand perpetuated by capitalism both in the television show, as well as in its parallel manifestation into reality.

*Keywords: Marxism, Marxist analysis, anti-capitalism, squid game, capitalism*

## **Anti-Capitalist Ideologies Uncovered in the Marxist Analysis of Hwang Dong-hyuk's Netflix Original *Squid Game* (2021)**

Capitalism often assumes a label of efficacy via supply and demand and the opportunity to attain success through hard work. However, dominated by mass media and the economic structures that shape it, capitalist societies have become more understanding of the possible toll on humanity capitalism is capable of. By taking a closer look at the media we consume, we can understand popular contemporary television like *Squid Game* as more than pure entertainment, but instead as a response to the pressure points synthesized through a capitalist, money-driven society. We can also identify ideologies that, although perhaps uncomfortable and painful in nature, are intrinsic to the evolution of humanity. This article aims to do exactly that: pinpoint the hidden anti-capitalist ideologies through the analysis of the cinematic contents of *Squid Game* using a Marxist lens. I will, first, define a theoretical framework of major aspects of Marxist analysis, briefly summarize the contents of the television program, and then describe the show's portrayal of capitalism's illusion of freedom, moral-altering dehumanization, and insatiable nature. Before looking at this piece of media, however, we must first briefly define each of the major components Marxism encompasses.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Arthur Asa Berger, a professor of communication and media studies, in his recent book *Media Analysis Techniques*, gives us major insight into the theoretical framework for Marxist analysis. This type of analysis functions under the premise that “the mode of production (economic relationships),” also known as the “base,” is “‘the determinant element’ in our thoughts... [and] influences, in profound and complicated

ways, the 'superstructure,' or institutions and values, of a given society" (Berger, 2019, pp. 57-58). An economic system such as capitalism would then be considered the base of a society and the superstructures that follow would be the ideologies that the mass collective holds about capitalism, the businesses that develop in response to a free market enterprise, and the educational curriculum that perpetuates that economic system, etc.

It is also important in Marxist analysis to understand the difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie "form the ruling class" and "own the factories and corporations" of their society while the proletariat are comprised of "the huge mass of workers who are exploited by this ruling class and whose condition becomes increasingly more desperate" (Berger, 2019, p. 65). In a capitalist society like America, the bourgeoisie includes private business ownerships that make up a large portion of the middle and upper classes, and the proletariat is the labor force that exchange their time and physical bodies for a wage as a means of survival.

Another concept that can help build a stronger understanding of Marxist analysis is the notion of "false consciousness" where "the dominant *material* force in society is at the same time its dominant *intellectual* force." In other words, the bourgeoisie "propagates an ideology that justifies its status and makes it difficult for ordinary people," or rather the proletariat, "to recognize that they are being exploited and victimized" (Berger, 2019, pp. 59, 60).

False consciousness and the class conflict between the ruling and working class also result in members of our society experiencing a state of alienation or a pervasive loss of "connections with others," as we engage in unfulfilling labor "not a part of [our]

nature,” and “consequently... [undergo] a feeling of misery” and exhaustion, denying ourselves the human necessity to “develop freely a physical and mental energy” (Berger, 2019, pp. 68-69). In applying this to *Squid Game*, this article seeks to identify the program’s representations of base and superstructure, bourgeoisie and proletariat, and instances where these representations indicate the appearance of Marxist concepts like false consciousness and alienation. The possible anti-capitalist ideologies advanced by these identifications will also be explored.

### **Description of the Text**

*The New York Times* writer Frank Bruni (2021) describes *Squid Game* as an effort to “[tap] into the [South Korea’s] deep feelings of inequality and ebbing opportunities, accounting for the worsening wealth disparity in Korea, despite becoming an economic powerhouse in the postwar era.” Previously a nation built on collective thinking from Confucianist and Daoist ideologies, “the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s undermined South Korea’s positive growth story and ‘made everyone fight for themselves’ as the housing market skyrocketed and the opportunities for employment dwindled overtime” (Young, 2021). The television series follows the story of Seong Gi-hun, a gambling addict with an elderly mother in poor health and a large accumulation of debt, who is asked to participate in a series of popular Korean children’s competitive games where he must fight for not only the opportunity to win a large cash prize, but also for his own life alongside many other contestants from all walks of life—from gangsters, to immigrants and North Korean defectors, to failed business owners and childhood friends—all unified by their severe financial debt and economic struggle. The contestants are stripped of their personal possessions and clothing in exchange for

green jumpsuits and an identification system using prison-like numbers. They are then taken to a secret, remote location where they are confronted with a series of deadly competitive games, as well as masked, armed enforcers similarly stripped of their names and placed into pink jumpsuits. Although the players are “aware of the stakes, they elect to continue ‘playing’ because they’ve been promised a future-changing amount of prize money if they prevail and because their existences beyond the arena are just as dehumanizing” (Bruni, 2021). The orchestrators of and onlookers to the game are kept anonymous from the contestants until the very end when the onlookers are revealed to be a group of predominantly wealthy men who bet on the contestants. The orchestrator is also an affluent man who had grown bored with his life and created the game for his own entertainment; he poses as one of the contestants.

Having established an understanding of the basic plotline, we can now analyze the implications we can draw from the media at hand.

### **Analysis of the Text**

#### **The Disguise of Freedom**

Capitalism often finds itself justified as a method for sustaining freedom of the people. This economic system, idealized, operates under the premise of equal opportunity, individuality, and the practice of autonomy. In creating *Squid Game*, Hwang Dong-hyuk has taken the concept of “an unbounded economy and the unfettered circulation of people, capital, and goods” (Webb & Byrmand, 2008, p. 90), creating a representation of capitalism, cloaked in the disguise of freedom and condensed into something consumable and controlled.

In episode two, “Hell,” the players are given the opportunity to vote to either continue or end the game. Lives are at stake and innocent people are being killed; the choice to end the game seems to be unquestionable. As each player steps towards the platform, however, the results are divided. Those who voted to end the game beg to “end this insanity,” only to be met with the sentiment that “‘hell’ isn’t about the competition where one false move equals a bullet to the head. Instead, it’s about life outside the arena, where the gap between rich and poor—lucky and unlucky—is vast (Bruni, 2021), exposing a harsh truth about the true nature of democracy in capitalist countries.

Although seeming to be an exercise of autonomy, in a capitalist society we are actually stripped of our ability to choose options that align with what we truly want for ourselves and humanity. For example, the participants deny themselves the right to their own life because either way, they are damned. When the option of death is placed in the same tier as survival via capitalism, there is no actual choice and a voting system is merely a performative, useless exercise in the ruse of democracy to keep us satiated by a morsel of choice.

The illusion of democracy in *Squid Game* functions as a signal of false consciousness. In a false consciousness, the proletariat is blinded to the fact they are being exploited since the bourgeoisie, who harbor the most power over the intellectual forces of a capitalist society, promote ideas that perpetuate their power and status. The orchestrators of the game, representing the bourgeoisie, use a voting system to give the contestants a false understanding of the power they have in the game. Like the contestants, capitalist societies are presented with a “sordid reality in which the

inhumane competition for money has become a natural condition of mankind, not a specific mode of oppression exacted by late capitalism” (Kim & Park, 2023, p. 459). In considering the capitalist economic system as the nature of things, the working class, similar to the contestants, become prisoners to the limitations of the structure around them, unable to really understand themselves as being victims of it, or rather, left unable to do anything about it.

### **Dehumanization and Moral Corruption**

By hosting an environment responsible for the alienation of its people, capitalism legitimizes the corruption of society’s moral high grounds, therefore detaching its participants from their humanity. In “the commodification of labor, the capitalist wage form,” comes an innate commodification of the people within that materialistic structure “as family provisioning and caring become dependent upon wage labor” (Acker, 2015, p. 125). People lose their sense of identity and are instead forced to take on the shape of material goods, their value granted not through what makes them human, but through their capital. Although built on the foundation that an individual’s hard work and acquired skills are conducive to success in capitalism, the contents of *Squid Game*, specifically how “each game has little to do with the individual player’s capability and often [depends] on unforeseen incidents or luck” (Kim & Park, 2023, p. 465), leads to the unfortunate circumstance where people are denied their own worth because of circumstances outside of their control. Under conditions in which the working class becomes almost roboticized by capitalism—treated as objects of service and labor rather than as living, breathing organic matter—there comes an element of barbarization of those people as well.



In observation of capitalism's rise to power through the means of brutish imperialism, there is no question that "violence has been an essential component of power... [in] the rational organization of capitalist economic activities" (Acker, 2015, pp. 129-130). The prospect of wealth and success undermines human compassion and empathy, working both with and against it at the same time. We are given insight into the characters of *Squid Game*, learning that the necessity of material stability is oftentimes motivated by intentions of love, such as wanting to buy a birthday gift for one's daughter, wanting to put a meal on your table for loved ones, or merely from a place of self-compassion and desire to enjoy one's life. What capitalism does, similar to what the games designed for television do, is capitalize on this internal compassion of its unfortunate participants, blurring the lines between what constitutes "good" and "bad."

When confronted with the possibility of execution, competitors are driven to cheat, lie, and betray each other, with violence growing as conditions become ever direr and individuals are pushed to their limits. However, by participating in these games, competitors are no longer considered human, but rather numbered jumpsuits and objects of entertainment; as result, they are put into states of constant moral dilemma.

Similarly, in the application of capitalism in the real world, some will turn to violent crime, illegal gambling rings, and other nefarious methods of obtaining necessities. Others categorize themselves into "the company man" archetype, someone "who will alienate every value, and every living thing, for the sake of the company's profit" (Webb & Byrnan, 2008, p. 93). Regardless of which end of the spectrum we fall under, we are placed into situations that encourage a betrayal of what keeps us wholesome.

## The Insatiability of Capitalism

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of capitalism lies within its insatiability, “[depending] entirely upon consumption” to create something “boundless and insatiable” in nature, and “[generating an undying] hunger, or desire, in people” (Webb & Byrmand, 2008, p. 91). The participants in *Squid Game* are constantly chasing money, in or out of the game, something they must for their survival. In episode one, “Red Light, Green Light,” we are shown a scene where the characters must pay to get something to eat and must also pay to simply return to their own homes.

With that, it is clear that the consciousness of the working class is “seized by a bottomless hunger” that would not otherwise exist without the “all consuming... ‘invisible hand...’ of supply and demand” (Webb & Byrmand, 2008, p. 92-93). Capitalism develops a process where its participants must make money to spend money and spend money to make money, and thus a vicious and undying cycle arises.

## Conclusion

Considering the show’s demonstration of the helplessness that comes from a hidden revocation of agency, as well as the immanent corruption and relentless insatiability witnessed both on screen and within spheres of our own reality, *Squid Game*, as a model of capitalism reminds us of a dire need for global economic reform, especially in countries deeply affected by capitalism. Anti-capitalist media like *Squid Game* is a useful model. In other words, it reflects the human condition, repackaged into consumable content. Harmony is not possible in an economic system designed to so perfectly undermine it, rooted in concepts of competition, materialism, and greed. It demonstrates the idea that capitalism promotes the dark side of human nature and must

be eradicated for global issues such as poverty, marginalization, and crime to be fully solved.

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