



CAPITALISM: A LOVE STORY (Cert 12A)

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Overview: Michael Moore's most ambitious documentary to date narrates the highs and lows of the relationship between America and capitalism.

Director: Michael Moore

Distributor: Overture Films

Length: 127 mins

Cautions: Occasional use of very strong language. Content has the potential to draw out strongly held opinions!

SUMMARY OF PLOT

The camera focuses on the face of a casualty of the recent economic crisis. Having just lost his family home, he looks both forlorn and despondent. After putting the last of his possessions in the back of a truck, the man reflects, "there's the people who have it all and there's the people who have nothing." The causes and implications of the system that produced such inequality are the subject matter of Michael Moore's latest documentary.

The opening sequence depicts a series of bank robberies caught on CCTV. This is followed by the clever juxtaposition of an old dramatised documentary on Ancient Rome with images that depict the modern American economy. Moore's message is that, as it was in Rome, power is now in the hands of a few with many forced into economic slavery. The images of bank robbers become a recurring metaphor – ordinary people wanting their money (and homes) back.

The recent economic crisis provides the immediate context for Moore's documentary. Footage of the excessive number of police used to evict people from their foreclosed home is followed by an interview with

the owner of 'Condo Vultures' – a businessman making a lot of money from buying foreclosed homes and selling them on at a profit.

Yet, for Moore, capitalism has not always been in such obvious crisis. He speaks somewhat fondly of his childhood, growing up in the economic boom that originated in the post-World War II expansion of industry. Not only were there well-paid jobs for the ordinary American but, due to high taxes on the rich (the top tax bracket was 90%), there was investment in infrastructure, education and so on.

However, there were limits to economic growth in this system. The power of the unions, regulation in the financial industry and the disincentive of high taxes all hampered the excessive wealth accumulation. The answer to this 'problem' was found in Ronald Reagan who Moore sees as the puppet of Wall Street.

Moore portrays the effects of this in a number of loosely connected but shocking case studies. The scandal of judges being paid to send teenagers to a private juvenile offenders centre is followed by an investigation into the risks posed by airline pilots being paid a small salary and forced to work other jobs. Another example comes from the 'dead peasants' insurance scheme that enables companies to take out life insurance policies on their staff. This bizarrely means that the company does very well if a young female employee, as statistically the least likely, unexpectedly dies.

An intriguing digression sees Moore looking at the relationship between Christianity and capitalism. Archive footage of TV presenters claiming that capitalism is compatible with the teachings of the Bible is juxtaposed with interviews between Moore and two Catholic priests and a Catholic bishop from his home city. They are unequivocal in stating that capitalism is a 'radical evil', 'contrary to Jesus'

teachings' and that it 'has to be eliminated'. This leads the narrator to reflect, 'I must have missed that part of the Bible where Jesus becomes a capitalist.'

The documentary then focuses on what happened when Wall Street got into trouble as a result of the financial crisis that began in 2007. Somewhat inevitably, this ends in Moore engaging in a little street theatre, trying to enter some of the banks with empty sacks in order to get the American people's money back.

Moore's solution to this crisis is democracy. He argues that America has in effect become a plutonomy (a society where economic growth is controlled and consumed by a few). Only by exercising their democratic rights can the American people change the system. He strongly suggests that the election of Barack Obama is a step in this direction.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Capitalism and Christianity – The documentary portrays two different ways of understanding the relationship between capitalism and Christianity. Is Christianity compatible with capitalism or is it, as Moore contends, in stark opposition to capitalism? How should we think about the relationship between faith and socio-economic structures?

Capitalism and inequality – Perhaps the most consistent criticism of capitalism is that it has produced dramatic inequality, both globally and regionally. The gap between rich and poor has increased over the last 30 years to historic levels. Does this mean that the system itself is unjust or does the responsibility lie with how individuals decide to use their immense wealth?

Capitalism, democracy and the future – The documentary argues that the hope for an alternative to capitalism lies in, or through, democracy. The

suggestion is that capitalism has created a society ruled by a plutonomy (the wealthy few) and only through citizens acting on their democratic rights, can a more equitable society be established.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Please note: Discussions on capitalism and economics can provoke very different responses that can quickly descend into unhelpful personalized arguments. It might be worth mentioning to the group the importance of respecting different opinions and the need to create an environment that welcomes disagreements without them becoming too personal.

Group Exercise

Before beginning a discussion about the content and ideas present in the documentary, it might be helpful to create a space for reflecting on the feelings and emotions it stirred.

Ask each member of the group to reflect on how the documentary made them feel, not what it made them think. Then ask each individual to express those emotions in one word which is then shared with the group.

Clip 1 – From 00:47:00 to 00:52:39 (Chapter 11)

Is capitalism a sin? Moore's opening question comes as quite a surprise. Many of us might be used to criticism of political and economic structures on economic grounds or even on moral grounds yet Moore places the debate in an explicitly Christian context. Moore attempts to counteract what he considers to be the myth that capitalism is compatible with Christianity. The priests interviewed are unequivocal in their condemnation. Perhaps the strongest criticism comes from the Catholic bishop: 'Jesus would have nothing to do with it'. The

documentary sets out an either/or paradigm – one side ‘baptising’ capitalism, the other ‘demonising’ it. Should we develop such strong opinions, or is it a little more complicated?

Small group discussion

- Perhaps the most common approach to the question of the relationship between religion and economics is to say that they are talking about two totally different aspects of life. Religion deals with the soul and spirituality whereas economics deals with the exchange of resources in the physical world. Religion is a question of faith, whereas economics is concerned with science.
- Discussion question 1: If this thinking is correct, what are the implications for Christianity?
- Discussion question 2: If this is not correct, what are the implications for economics?

Whole group discussion

- If we can talk meaningfully about Christianity and capitalism, how should we have that conversation? The film offers stark alternatives – ‘demonising’ or ‘baptising’ capitalism. This approach is a little problematic. If you think of a system as entirely good, you become blind to any faults that emerge. If you see a system as entirely evil you will miss any redemptive possibilities present within the system.
- Divide a flip chart into two sections. On one side brainstorm what aspects of capitalism you think might be in conflict with how you understand the Christian faith. On the other side, put the aspects that seem to you to be in tune with it.

Clip 2 – DVD 00:52:39 – 00:53:29 (Beginning of chapter 12)

The leaked Citigroup memo contains an unnerving fact – the top 1 per cent has more financial wealth

than the bottom 95 per cent. This remarkable statistic reveals the rising inequality within society.

Group debate: Is inequality unjust?

Recently, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates led a campaign that saw 38 billionaires in the US pledge to give over 50 per cent of their wealth to charity.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-10870361>) This has led many to praise this philanthropy as an example of what a ‘softer’ capitalism looks like. This ‘softer’ version sees individuals and businesses choosing to actively use their resources to help those in poverty. However, others argue that these billionaires are simply trying to repair with their right hand what they have destroyed with their left. In other words, they are part of the problem as the system itself is unjust. As such, what is needed in the long term is not more charity but a new economic system.

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- It might be entertaining and informative to set up a debate where one or two volunteers argue for or against a proposition. Give each side 5 minutes to present their argument then a further 10 minutes to respond to the other side. After the debate, have a group discussion around the merits of the different arguments presented. A provocative statement to debate that is related to this discussion and is one that everybody could relate to is, ‘Bill Gates has done more good for the world than Mother Theresa.’

Clip 3 – DVD 00:53:29 – 1:00:05 (End of last clip to end of Chapter 13)

Michael Moore does not give a detailed picture of what an alternative to capitalism might look like. He does, however, suggest that the answer lies in democracy. Whether that is voting in a new president

or running businesses more democratically, democracy offers the hope of something different.

Whole group and small group discussion

- The journalist from The Wall Street Journal tells Michael Moore that capitalism is more important than democracy. His argument is that capitalism creates wealth whereas all democracy does is create a choice between available options. He suggests that democracy might not lead to the best possible outcome for society. For Moore, democracy is the only way that the inequalities in society and in businesses can be overcome. If people can see the reality of how society functions (hence Moore's rallying call before the closing credits), they will use their vote to change the system. He clearly greets the election of Barack Obama as a key sign that America is changing in this regard.
- Do you feel that you have the same voice in society as the super rich? Do you feel that our economic system threatens our political system? Discuss this in pairs and, if there is time, feed back the highlights of the discussion to larger group.
- Do you or have you ever had a job where you felt you were just a cog in a machine? Have you felt voice-less and uninvolved in the decisions that dictated your working life? Discuss in pairs what these experiences are/were like and how they make/made you feel. Encourage those with vivid experiences to recount their experience to the rest of the group. Then re-watch the clip that looked at the worker co-operative in Wisconsin (00:56:16–00:58:13). Start an informal discussion about what differences you recognise in how people are valued in that business to the stories people told about their de-humanising experiences in the work place.

GOD'S STORY

Capitalism and Christianity – Leviticus 25

What can an agricultural economy from thousands of years ago have to say to our complex contemporary technological economy? In the case of the Jubilee laws God prescribed to govern Israel, the answer is much! These offer a vision of relatedness and were designed to ensure the socio-economic inclusion of every family in Israel. If through mismanagement or bad luck, one was forced to sell their land then it would be returned to the family after 50 years. During the years of financial difficulty it was likely that the family would have to scatter and sell their labour where they could. But in the year of jubilee the family would come back together – a true homecoming. With renewed access to the land for farming, they regained their economic independence and maintained the relationship between people and place. The Jubilee laws produced a market economy but it was an economy that served the inherent good of relationships – between God, the people and the land.

Discussion starters

- Capitalist ideology is based on a free market, which is a market where there are in theory no objective purposes or ends that the market should serve. The moral justification is that it is based on, and respects, the choices of individuals. There is much that can be said for this as it protects individuals from the state. However, it does end up reinforcing the individualism present in modern society. If we assume that modern markets should at some level serve relationships and the common good, what economic changes could you imagine that might work towards these ends?

Capitalism and inequality – Matthew 6.19–24

This passage is all about money. Some have attempted to spiritualise and generalise this passage but any investigation into the original Greek meaning and the thematic structure of the Sermon on the Mount reveals that it is about wealth. What is remarkable about this passage is how Jesus claims that our approach to wealth is intimately connected to the rest of our life. This is uncomfortable reading for a capitalist society that has made the vast accumulation of wealth morally acceptable. Interestingly, the passage seems not to be concerned with the effect we have on others by having money as our master but the effect it has on us. Vast accumulation of wealth might anger us because we see so much need elsewhere in the world. Rarely are we concerned about what that wealth is doing to the person in possession of it.

Small groups discussion

- Why do you think Jesus seems to draw such a strong connection between our relationship to money and the state of our hearts? Why is money such an uncompromising master?
- Does this passage make you think any differently about the debate exercise earlier in this piece regarding the relative worth of Bill Gates and Mother Theresa?

Capitalism and Democracy: Following Christ – Matthew 4.18–20

Though Michael Moore's ideas for an alternative to capitalism have some merit, they fall short in light of the biblical story. Dallas Willard, in the book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* argues that the 'holy grail of modernity' is the search for new political systems and structures that will end poverty and injustice 'while letting us continue to be and to live as we have since Adam.' Dallas Willard is not saying that all political and economic systems and structures are neutral.

Systems can certainly be better or worse. They can promote human flourishing or violently repress it. What we can learn from Willard is that our hope and faith should not be placed in economic and political systems, as Michael Moore's clearly is. We should certainly desire more just economic arrangements but we should also aspire, in and through following Christ, to be the type of people that embody economic justice.

The most significant question to ask when looking at capitalism is 'how am I living?' We make a myriad of choices everyday that involve economics. If we listen carefully, we can see within each choice the possibility of following the example of Christ more fully in this important area of our lives.

Discussion starters

- Take a few minutes and review in silence the decisions you made today about what to do, or what not to do with your money and resources. Take one decision and consider to what extent did that decision embody economic justice. Then share that experience and process with someone else in the group.

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