

***Capitalism: A Love Story* (Michael Moore 2009)**

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Michael Moore's most recent documentary is a remarkable addition to his series of highly successful non-fiction films which includes *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Sicko* (2007). The title *Capitalism: A Love Story* is not as ironic as it seems to be because, as we learn in the course of the film, the young Michael Moore admired the system because it offered an impressive variety of ice creams. Such romantic notions of capitalism, however, have become obsolete especially in the wake of the financial crisis and the 700 billion dollar bailout that was jammed through Congress in 2009. For Moore that bailout symbolizes a coup d'état, a final take-over of the country by the "Goldman Gang." It marks the end of a negative development that has favoured the profits of a scrupulous minority over the interests of the common man.

Something has gone badly wrong in God's own country...

Moore illustrates his point by a series of examples from different layers of life:

- Early on in film, a family in North Carolina is seen videoing their own eviction by police force. They lose their home because the police are forced to act as agents of the banks, and the speculators who are already waiting like vultures for another home sold at bargain price.
- In another scene a carpenter is boarding up the residence of a family who lose their home of 40 years.
- In February 2009 a plane crashed near Buffalo. Moore reveals that the two pilots, rather than concentrating on the plane's descent, were actually talking about their (incredibly low) salaries shortly before the disaster.
- Banks and corporations have started to take out so-called "dead peasant" life insurance policies on their employees; needless to say, the payoffs go to the companies.
- Young people were unjustly imprisoned in a privatized juvenile detention center in Pennsylvania. Two judges apparently received millions as a compensation for their "efforts" from the facility owners. Even the law, we

learn, is subject to ruthless financial interests. It can be twisted in virtually any direction if the financial “incentives” are strong enough. Human life, we have to conclude, is evaluated only in terms of money. All notions of decency and care seem to have completely disappeared from present-day America.

In fact, Moore’s film describes a process that sociologists have labelled as reification, a term which points to the intrusion of all areas of human life by capitalist logic.

Moore’s answer to this process lies in a return to the spirit of his first film *Roger & Me* (1989) which emphasized the power of solidarity. History seems to repeat itself in the *Republic Windows and Doors Factory* in Chicago where, in 2008, workers occupy their factory after the management decided to close the plant. Eventually the workers win an average of 86,000 dollars per person. This example shows that individuals can win over the system and that solidarity can fight corporate power.

Capitalism: A Love Story is not Michael Moore’s strongest movie. The narrative is loose, and the individual episodes seem to be a bit jumbled. Even Moore’s agitprop tactics are close to self-parody, as it is exemplified by one of the last scenes in the movie. The filmmaker drives an empty armored truck to the headquarters of Citibank and other bailout recipients asking for the taxpayer’s billions. Of course, his request is being turned down. But what did Moore expect? The impression is that even Moore himself did not believe in the success of his operation.

Another major flaw is Moore’s insistence on comparing today’s America with ancient Rome. Comparisons are always problematic and the analogy between the decline of the Roman Empire and the decline of capitalism is a bit too simplistic to make sense. It is effective, though, because the film uses the analogy to emphasize a new spirit of hope which is associated with President Obama. Moore seems to believe that Obama is the only one who can save America from the fate of the Romans. Even Moore has to admit, though, that Goldman Sachs was the largest private contributor to Obama’s presidential campaign.

There is no doubt that *Capitalism: A Love Story* is a highly entertaining and revealing film. There is also no doubt, however, that it cannot match the standards of the finest critique of present-day America that has hit the screen in recent years, of *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney 2005). Gibney’s documentary (which is based on the best-selling book of the same name) is far more coherent in its narrative and far more hard-hitting in its

extremely negative commentary on the impacts of an excessive deregulation. By concentrating on one event only, the infamous Enron disaster, and by showing how capitalist ideology turns into a synonym of insatiable greed, the film is as deeply disturbing as it is revealing. Contrary to Moore, Alex Gibney lays bare the changes in the political and legal structures which allowed an almost totalitarian view of the so-called free market to pave the way towards a total triumph of individual greed over the needs and interests of the people. Moore's vision of society is more romantic; he likes to engage in the old tale of the good guys against the bad. Individual vices are rarely presented as the result of a specific social framework. Therefore, his recipe for the current political and financial crisis is fairly simple; it seems that all with courage and strength (like himself) who emphasize the rights of *Mr. Smith*. In that respect Moore is a radical democrat. His trust in the value of solidarity, in strikes and various forms of civil disobedience is not an expression of some kind of left-wing ideology; it is, on the contrary, rooted in the American Constitution. For Moore the opposite of capitalism is not socialism but democracy.

