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***Capitalism: A Love Story***

**LAST TUESDAY** I traipsed to Manchester's art house cinema, Cornerhouse, to see Michael Moore's latest movie, *Capitalism: A Love Story*. I don't usually go to Cornerhouse; I prefer the atmosphere of the Odeon multiplex at the Printworks, Manchester's rumbustious entertainment mall. There is nothing improving there, and very little that's informative, yet its habitués seem to have a much firmer grasp on the nature of capitalism than the self-improving crowd at Cornerhouse. However, on this occasion the Odeon wasn't screening the film so I had to join the art house aficionados and a clutch of well-heeled seniors of a similar vintage to myself, which I took to be ex-Stalinists, intent on having the prejudices of our lifetimes confirmed by a very rich fat bloke in a baseball cap.

Much to my astonishment, once the trailers and the ads were done and the movie started, I was gripped from start to finish. I was ready for numerous scenes of Moore harassing doormen and security staff at the entrances to impressive office blocks, but he has managed to cut this down to a minimum. Instead we were treated to an amusing series of film clips celebrating the 'American Way of Life' juxtaposed with the squalid 'Glory that was Rome' and the misdeeds of presidents, legislators, bankers, and all the other villains on Wall Street.

The film shows the tragedy of families being evicted from their homes because the banks have foreclosed on their mortgages. These people, who have lost more or less everything, are shown with compassion as they wrestle with helpless dismay, bewilderment, and anger. But, Moore is careful not simply to catalogue despair and helplessness, he also tells of a spirited family who when faced with the sheriff, court

orders, and bank officials, simply refused to move. Surrounded by their neighbours equipped with megaphone, placards and news cameras, they fight back, and the bailiffs are forced to retreat empty-handed. The family defiantly stays put.

A similar story is repeated at Republic Windows and Doors, in Chicago, Illinois. Here, when 260 workers were made redundant, Bank of America, despite having collected millions from the taxpayer in the bailout, blocked payment of the workers' back pay and benefits. Led by maintenance worker, Armando Robles, and union official, Mark Meinster of UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America), the workers occupied the factory and began a sit-in strike. The action won significant solidarity in Chicago, good coverage from the regional media, and support from the White House in form of a statement of from Barack Obama. The strikers won; Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase were forced to pay out \$1.75 million to the embattled workers.

Stirring examples of neighbourhood solidarity in Miami, worker organization in Michigan, together with reports of working people establishing successful manufacturing co-operatives in Wisconsin and California, do much to lift the spirits but, when measured against the devastation of the industrial and social infrastructure displayed in the film, they pale into insignificance. From now on, the movie and Michael Moore's narrative, is in serious trouble.

"The Most Feared Filmmaker in America" lacks a powerful punch. Despite Moore's undoubtedchutzpah he appears to be unable to do much more than advocate Roman Catholic Social Doctrine which emphasises family and neighbourhood solidarity over that of heartless 'greed' and rapacious money-making. Moore shows us several priests heartily disapproving of "sinful" capitalism, and there's a splendid clip of a Bishop in a nice purple cap giving Holy Communion to Catholic workers in struggle.

From the obligatory enlistment of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, Moore moves

on to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Old FDR apparently had the right idea when it came to fighting capitalism. He strengthened the trade unions, was prepared to use the National Guard to defend militant workers from the bosses' anti-union toughs and goons, and he proposed a wide programme of reforms aimed at promoting security of employment, guaranteeing health insurance for all, and a comprehensive safety net of welfare benefits.

Moore omits to remind his viewers that FDR was able to rally support in ruling circles in the thirties and forties because the working class in those days was pretty scary. Despite the depredations and duplicity of Stalin, the credit and example of the Soviet Union was riding high. A spectre was haunting America's power-elite, the spectre of communism. In such circumstances it seemed only prudent to the sensible layers of the American bourgeoisie to argue for fairness and social welfare. With the post-War boom and the return of full employment the threat receded, so McCarthyism was swiftly deployed to help unravel FDR's concessions.

Moore, still manifestly hankering after FDR and the New Deal passes lightly over this history without explanation. This is as close as *Capitalism: A Love Story* gets to anti-capitalism. Strangely, he does acknowledge that many wealthy countries have the kind of health and welfare safety net he wants implemented in America; he does not however make much out of the fact that these countries: France, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Australia, Japan, to name a few, are all resolutely capitalist societies. This startling fact slips beyond the reach of his argument; consequently he lets it pass without investigation.

The ironic intention of Moore's title is belied by his failure to make any case against capitalism at all. He has certainly argued against a particular manifestation of capitalism – capitalism in America – and in favour of something he has chosen to call "Democracy". At the very end of the film Moore says boldly that "Democracy" is the alternative to capitalism. Any

European will immediately recognise the missing word: “Social”. What Moore is advocating is “Social Democracy”; he is not advocating the overthrow of capitalism or its replacement with socialism or anything as radical as workers’ control or even communism with a human face. He wants capitalism with the blatant excesses of bankers brought under control by a state and society committed to basic norms of fairness, solidarity, and social welfare for all.

This is good. It is particularly good in America where millions lack elementary health and welfare provision. However, Moore’s analysis and the solutions he suggests present more of a problem for people confronting capitalist crisis in many other parts of the world. Workers in Europe and elsewhere will, no doubt, fight tooth and nail to defend the “social wage” of health insurance and welfare benefits against emergency budgets and the fiscal measures taken by embattled finance ministers. But, it is not at all clear how Michael Moore’s combination of moral outrage, and condemnation of capitalist excess, or his demand for fairness, is going to contribute to an effective strategy for strengthening social solidarity.

Moore has nothing to say about the really tricky issues: the so-called ‘export of jobs’, protectionism, or immigration controls, all issues which spring up like poisonous weeds in the heart of the working class when confronted by mass unemployment and poverty. We are cheered up instead, by a cocktail lounge rendition of the *Internationale* by Tony Babino singing the great communist anthem in the style of Dean Martin. Great fun. But as the final credits roll, brotherly love is brought to the fore with Woody Guthrie singing the old song, *They laid Jesus Christ in His grave*.

Michael Moore, like Guthrie’s Christ, stands for the timeless struggle of the dispossessed for fairness and the New Deal. Moore may not actually love capitalism, but he certainly doesn’t hate it, and as this film makes abundantly clear he has no intention of joining any attempt to overthrow it.