

Aria Mustary

Professor Levinson / Professor Tosti-Kharas

The Nature, Culture, and Future of Work

28 April 2021

Work in Capitalistic Society: A Zero Sum System

For thousands of years, lords and serfs comprised the unchallenged economic system of feudalism. In this system, where the power resided was clear and mobility was extremely limited. As this period ended, a new system dawned: capitalism. In this system, there was an increased degree of mobility, but some structures still remained, and they persist to this day. Under today's late-stage capitalism, the lords have become employers and the serfs the workers. The relationship between them remains one that extracts value from the bottom and siphons it to the top. In effect, this creates a zero-sum relationship, that is, the employers tend to succeed at the expense of their workers and the workers' success comes at the expense of the employer's profit. Systems and structures have been built to obscure this relationship, allowing those with power to maintain it. These structures are visible across society, and as such, have been captured in one of the most prevalent art forms of our time: film. Films depicting work portray characters' experiences with figures of authority, employers, and society as a whole, and, through an analytical lens, paint a picture of how these structures affect workers and their behaviors. Across genres, work-centric films reveal that the belief systems and power structures created to organize work in capitalistic societies force a zero-sum relationship between the worker and those in power, ultimately leading to the worker's corruption or exploitation.

This idea is seeded in the way that power is leveraged in the context of a zero-sum relationship. This relationship, in a capitalist society, is seen, at the most basic level, between a

manager and their employees. This often comes from their explicit “power over other employees” (Ciulla 75), meaning that they gain power by taking it from those they oversee or manage. While this is a more granular relationship, it is actually an extension of the relationship between employers and workers. The employer, boss, or company as a whole, only gains by taking from their employees. Here, they are taking not just autonomy, choice, or freedom, but, measurably, they are taking the money earned by the worker. And in a capitalist society, money is power. The only reason a worker, for example, an IT support technician, may not make the \$100 per hour billed to a customer is that the IT support company that oversees the worker takes 40% of it. The employer in this example is extracting value from the work of their technician. This forms the basis of a zero-sum relationship, where the amount of financial benefit gained by the employer equates to the exact amount that is taken from the employee, meaning the employer only succeeds at the direct expense of the worker, even if only a portion of the employee’s earnings is being taken. While capitalism has fabricated false consciousness to convince workers this is fair, some still may not be convinced. Those who feel wronged by this system may then attempt to recapture some of that power, but may do so at the expense of their personal ethics.

In an attempt to recapture some power, workers may turn to retaliation against those who have wronged them. However, it is not always a specific person or boss that wrongs the worker. In fact, it is often the system itself that creates these inequities. In Ramin Bahrani’s *99 Homes*, Rick Carter is a real estate agent who saw these inequities firsthand during the 2008 financial crisis. He watched as “the government... lifted up every regulation and sat there like a retarded stepchild” (Bahrani 57:00). Workers who went to put money into homes were taken advantage of, because at the end of the day “America [in] 2010 [didn’t give] a flying rat’s ass about” the average person (Bahrani 57:42). Rick uses this as a rationale to effectively get back the

government by gaming the system of foreclosures. Though Rick was not employed by the government, he was a worker in a system where the government held power, highlighting the way that a worker may retaliate against their employer for wronging them, and sacrifice their ethics in the process. But this retaliation is also visible clearly within the workplace, as seen in Mike Judge's *Office Space* with Michael's virus. This virus took "fractions of a cent, which... usually round off" on each transaction, thousands of times per day, and deposited that money in his and his friends' personal accounts (Judge 47:22). But once someone goes down this path and abandons their ethics, "[that] moral dimension is hard to recover," resulting in not just a temporary ethical breach, but more permanent corruption (Schwartz 56). Nonetheless, this was Michael's only real way of getting value back, retaliating against the company he works for. Both Rick and Michael are fighting the systems of power at play because, due to the zero-sum dynamic, those in power must lose for them as workers to gain. In both cases, the films show how workers are forced to abandon ethics, corrupting themselves in order to regain power in their zero-sum work relationships.

This then begs the question, however, of what happens under normal circumstances, when the worker does not retaliate. Ken Loach's *Sorry We Missed You* shows a prime example of a worker who does not challenge this zero-sum system: Ricky. Ricky, throughout the film, is pushed to his physical and emotional limits as a delivery driver in the gig economy. On one of his first days on the job, fellow workers hand him a bottle, saying "[it] is the most important thing.... [and that Ricky will] need [it]" (Loach 11:24). All of the workers in the depot have come to terms with the fact that in order to make their routes on time, they would need to urinate in bottles in their vans. Throughout the film, Ricky is put into countless similar situations in which the working conditions are clearly unethical. However, unlike Rick and Michael, he does

not retaliate once. Here, ethics come into clearer focus as the tool of regaining power in a zero-sum work system. The delivery company that contracts Ricky amplifies their power over him by subjecting him to unethical work conditions. If he were to breach his ethics like Rick and Michael, he could regain power, but instead, he evades corruption. The cost of this non-retaliation and non-corruption is his further exploitation. By taking a complete view of the situations faced by Rick, Michael, and Ricky, it is clear that zero sum capitalist systems of work have only two options for workers who wish to regain their power: sacrifice ethics and corrupt themselves, or be exploited.

These capitalist systems, forcing choice between corruption and exploitation, are actually designed that way intentionally. The intentional component here is the tendency towards exploitation. The most raw form of exploitation is slavery, so it can be used as a lens to explore the concept. Thomas Ruffin, a southern judge from 1829, recognized that for slaves, their purpose “is the profit of the master,” but that is effectively contingent on the slave lacking “the capacity to make anything his own” (Ciulla 77). Here, drawing a parallel between the capitalist counterparts, it is clear that the worker’s true purpose is profiting their employer, but only so long as they cannot share in the fruits of their labor. In capitalism, workers do receive a portion of the value they create, but inherently, the system is designed to extract as much as possible from workers. This again paints the zero-sum relationship - employers are gaining at the direct expense of their workers. Like slavery, capitalist systems of work require the system to be inherently exploitative. If an employer requires value to come from their workers, they must structure the systems of work to enable exploitation, be that actively or passively. This exploitation is therefore the default state for workers in these zero-sum systems.

The clearest form of system-enabled exploitation is found in circumstances where the default state of things could be more fair, but some form of active intervention favors those in power. Active intervention comes in many forms, but the simplest of them come in the form of a choice or decision. These decisions are typically ones reserved for those in power, in situations that could theoretically play out either well, or poorly, for the worker. When Ricky goes to his depot manager for time off, the manager could choose to accommodate him, but instead he draws the GPS barcode scanner “box” and tells him that “this decides who lives and who dies” (Loach 1:06:15). The manager is actively choosing to exploit Ricky here. However, this exploitation is enabled by the system itself, by the “box” that is making his exploitation the status quo. And just as the manager’s choice could have dramatically changed Ricky’s situation, a judge’s choice could have done the same for Nash in *99 Homes*, the protagonist who loses his house at the beginning of the film. The judge represents the same power as the depot manager, and could have chosen to give Nash a break, but instead, chooses to exploit him in the situation. By saying that he “[saw] no reason to hold up the sale” (Bahrani 6:03), the literal capital at play in this capitalist system has reinforced the standard that those without power are always disadvantaged. While this circumstance follows a homeowner, it sheds light onto the fact that anywhere capitalism exists, there will be exploitation of those without power, AKA, the worker. Ricky and Nash depict how those in power make active choices to exploit workers, with the sole purpose of benefiting the employer or the party in power.

However, active choices are not the only way systems can enable exploitation. Arguably, more dangerous are the aspects of systems that enable exploitation through inaction. Inaction is powerful because those in power have sculpted the rules to make their success the default. The consultants in *Office Space* point out this default when discussing Milton, who, by virtue of a

glitch, is not employed by the company. They choose not to actively fire him, but let his paychecks stop going out, so that “it will work itself out naturally..... [and they can] avoid confrontation” in the situation (Judge 39:50). Here, the system, composed of accounting and HR, enables management to exploit Milton as he continues to work, without having to take any action. With inaction giving way to exploitation, it is clear that these systems make exploitation the default state. The managers in *Office Space* and *Sorry We Missed You*, along with the judge in *99 Homes*, all maintain their power by making exploitation the foundation of their relationships. Given that all of these relationships siphoned value from the exploited to the powerful, they all continue to emphasize the zero-sum nature of the dynamic. All of those in power sacrificed any semblance of personal ethics in order to maintain this, both actively and passively, solidifying the pattern that these zero-sum systems of work are designed to exploit.

While systems of work are designed to exploit, they also must leverage tools beyond workplace policies and laws, ensuring power can be maintained over workers no matter where they are. Enter meritocracy. The moment capitalism came into existence, it brought with it a sense of mobility. In modern times, this mobility is increasingly limited, so meritocracy is used as a guise to convince people it is more attainable than it actually is. In the United States, this takes the form of the American Success Myth, but overarchingly, the idea of meritocracy itself, no matter where it is found, is used by people in power to maintain their power. Technically, meritocracy does exist, but only for the powerful and the privileged. Those in power have the ability to achieve more on the basis of their past accomplishments. However, this is not possible for workers, but they still buy into its existence because those in power often attribute their success to meritocracy, prompting them to “consider their success their own doing” (Sandel 25). But, if those in power have nearly all of the opportunities and workers have effectively none,

then that means that opportunities are either being taken from the workers directly, or not created in the first place for workers to preserve the status of the powerful. Regardless of which of these factors is responsible, meritocracy creates a zero-sum system, continuing to exploit workers by siphoning opportunity away from them.

This system of exploitation via meritocracy functions in full force in many capitalist work environments. *Sorry We Missed You* overtly paints Ricky as a subscriber to meritocracy. He believes that with “12 months under [his] belt, [he] can expand the franchise” of his delivery “business” (Loach 6:03). He later goes out of his way to sell their family’s only and most essential asset, his wife’s car, to enable his success. He is convinced that he can rise because of the promises of meritocracy. Of course, this is only another way to exploit Ricky, forcing him to bear the burden of all costs and liabilities with little benefit. He takes that burden so that the depot does not have to, perpetuating the zero-sum relationship. However, meritocracy is not always so clearly subscribed to. For Michael in *Office Space*, he implies some degree of belief in the system. When Peter hints at him possibly losing his job, Michael tells him that he “better snap out of it and get [his] shit together or [Peter is] going to get canned” (Judge 47:22). While Michael may not show belief that he himself is advancing in the workplace, he does still see the system as rewarding or at least respecting those who put in work. Ultimately though, the company plans to lay him off, showing that they are using his belief in meritocracy to string him along and eventually replace him entirely, exploiting him for the quality work he does. Here again, Michael is slated to lose his job so that the company can get cheaper labor, a zero-sum interaction. Both Ricky and Michael are exploited by their employers because of their belief in meritocracy, positioning it as a tool to aid exploitation already baked into their systems of work.

The common thread between Ricky and Michael is that they are exploited because of their subscription to meritocracy. This subscription is apparent with *99 Homes*' Nash, who starts out his story with similar ties to exploitation and meritocracy. He is shown as a man driven by hard work, in the construction industry, and believes that he will get paid based off of the work he has done, by earning it. Instead, he is told by a fellow worker that “for the last two weeks [they had] been working for free” (Bahrani 5:03) because the homebuyer did not qualify for a loan. This is the cornerstone of failed meritocracy: a worker without power being exploited, having done free work for weeks. But, when Nash meets Rick, his position changes. Working for Rick, while still being a worker, he is granted power, but that power is now over homeowners in foreclosing. Now that the dynamic has changed, meritocracy is working to his benefit. Nash begins to make more money and eventually is positioned for a big payout from a major real estate transaction. This shows clearly how the shift in power immediately enabled meritocracy. But now, Nash is the one in power, and he has formed a zero-sum relationship with homeowners, who he exploits to make his money. As he transitioned to gaining this power, Nash progressively abandoned his ethics, reinforcing meritocracy's ability to lead to exploitation and corruption.

Ultimately, Nash's experience solidifies how meritocracy both benefits the powerful and exploits the worker, thus enabling the status quo of the system and highlighting the corruption that comes from recapturing power. Across *99 Homes*, *Sorry We Missed You*, and *Office Space*, the characters depict the underpinnings of the nature of work in capitalist systems. Workers are forced into circumstances where they are robbed of their power. They are then subjected to systems designed to enable their exploitation, which is reinforced by ideologies like meritocracy. In effect, it is clear that work itself, at least in a capitalist society, not only incorporates, but requires an imbalance of power in the form of a zero-sum relationship for workers. That

relationship forces workers' hands, pushing them to abandon their ethics or be further taken advantage of. Though it has been centuries since the advent of capitalism, it continues to maintain the status quo from the days of feudalism. However, today, serfs have two simple options: corruption or exploitation.

Works Cited

Ciulla, Joanne B. *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. Times Books, 2000.

Sandel, Michael J. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.

Schwartz, Barry. *Why We Work*. TED Books, Simon & Schuster, 2015.