Relocating the Roots of Marxism in the Call of the Wild and the Iron Heels of Jack London

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Abstract: Bernard Shaw and George Orwell are famous for their socialistic vision who had talent to depict a society torn between capitalism and socialism in their works. They indicated the capitalistic trend of the British society. In this research paper the socialist vision of Jack London is traced who explored the tension between the growing capitalism and Marxist socialism relying on the theories of Karl Marx and Michael Foucault. The entrepreneurs of America controlled the means of production and their main motive was to make more profit and accumulate wealth. Georg Lukács developed an ideology and refers to as the base and superstructure. In the words of Bressler (2011) Lukács believes that “the superstructure reflects the economic base, Italian Antonio Gramsci declares that a complex relationship exists between the base and the superstructure which he calls hegemony” (Bressler172). The capital system of America blessed them with political and economic power and bankers, landowners sequesters the proletariats. The greed and money mania brought about human degradation in American society. Marx's theory of Economic Determinism is very popular as the theory brought revolution in Russia and Europe. Marx revolutionized the European philosophical thoughts by his ideas of economic determinism. He contends that the basic structure of society is structured around the means of production. When Jack London started writing America was in the height of industrialization and the growth of capitalism was at its peak. The technological innovations and improvements revolutionized the social life of America; the cotton fields, the plantations employed millions of middle class workers. Financial institutions such as banks, insurance companies and other money lending agencies flourished empowering the business tycoons. The railroad and the other construction companies employed millions of workers who suffered all forms of oppression and exploitation. In the early years of his life Jack London was a revolutionary. He felt the hunger pangs of the workers of the jute mills and other industrial places. He had closely observed the frustration of the under-privileged people. He became a radical thinker; writer and clamored the doctrine of class struggle.

Index Terms: Capitalism, Socialism, Degradation, Accumulate, Revolution, Exploitation, Repression

I. TECHNOLOGICAL, FRUSTRATION, PROLETARIAT

Like Dos Passos Jack London keenly observed the social and economic conditions of the working class people of America and found the miserable condition of the labours who worked day and night in the factories coal mines and heavy industries of America. He had the first hand experience of the oppressive capital system since he was also a poor worker belonging to lower middle class. He sought inspiration from the philosophical ideas of Karl Marx; Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Spencer. He wrote novels in which he scrapped American Dream; the myth of success and mad pursuit of money culture. The World War 1 led to the Cultural Revolution in America with the growth of technology and industry. America emerged as a super power and fashion and values changed rapidly. This study is an investigation of the revolutionary ideas of Jack London and his socialistic approach to the problems confronted by the working class people. It is on record that London used to live in a dark and dingy room and many times he had to sleep on a rain-soaked street or in one of the city’s homeless shelters, known as spikes. In Kent he was shocked to see how many young Americans had to do endure everything just to earn a few extra pence. He remained attached to the American working class till the end of his life. He devoted his valuable time, money and energy to the social cause and launched a crusade against the oppressive American capitalists. The present paper is fresh and innovative as all the modern and post-modern theories of Marx Foucault and Zizek have been applied to interpret the socialistic vision of Jack London. Gyorgy Lukacs opines in his book History and Class Consciousness (1923) that the plot of a good novel must promote the interests of the proletariats. Georges Lukacs wrote History and Class Consciousness (1923, translated 1971)[11,23,15,17] and The Historical Novel (1962). In his early Theory of the Novel (1916) Lukacs further explores the relationship of the capitalist and the working class. In the western world Raymond Williams gave a cultural materialist criticism relying on the theories of Marx. He wrote Culture and Society 1780-1950, analyzing the cultural critique of capitalism. He also published Marxism and Literature (1977) evaluating the review of Marxist theories from the modern perspective.

In each novel Jack London has Jack London’s associations and understanding with the labor classes formed the basis of all his novels. Jack London had closely observed the struggles; violence; strikes and the hegemony of the upper classes. The cultural changes brought new changes transcending the boundaries of American Dream and Americanism. The labor classes working on the farms; the fruit pickers and farm workers were exploited socially; economically and culturally. Marx holds that the structure of the bourgeois’ enterprise is imperialistic. In order to sustain itself, capitalism must spread its tentacles all over the world: “The bourgeoisie
cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the 
theories of production. The need of a constantly 
expanding market... chases the bourgeoisie over the 
surface of the globe”).[17] The bourgeoisie “creates a world 
after its own image” (Marx and).[19] The Marxists believe 
that in the world of capitalism all human relationships 
are measured in terms of money and profit. Marx traces 
the history of mankind and contends that since antiquity there 
had been only two classes in the world; bourgeoisie and 
the proletariat. The political leaders of America were silent 
spectators of the cruelties perpetrated on the farm workers. 
The lust for money; greed and money culture had 
dehumanized the upper classes; the landlords and the 
owners of the ranches. Freeman Champney (1947)[2] in his 
article “Jack Londonand Californian” published in Antioch 
Review observes thus: “The proletariat was kept homeless, 
vote less, and close to or below the starvation point, with 
the gulf between it and the dominant group widened by 
racial differences” (338). Jack London championed the 
cause of the downtrodden workers while exposing and 
ridiculing the hypocrisy and avarice of the upper classes. In 
March, 1903 London published the article [20]“How I 
Became a Socialist” in The Comrade which was an official 
Socialist Party Publication, London explained the 
experiences of his life. 
Since that day I have opened many books, but no 
economic argument, no lucid demonstration of the 
logic and the inevitableness of Socialism affects me as 
profoundly and convincingly as I was affected on the 
day when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit Rise 
around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into 
the shambles at the bottom. (London 365) 
The novel The Call of the Wild depicts the story of Buck 
who is the super-dog and his struggle from poverty and 
squalor to a position of distinction and security. Jack 
London wrote this story of all strong people who use the 
cunning of their minds and the strength of their bodies to 
adapt themselves to a harsh environment. London gave the 
message through the struggles of Buck that in the world of 
capitalism weaklings have no place and the only way to 
fight with the capitalist is to “unite and fight”. London 
portrayed Buck as the invincible model of himself. Jack 
London advocated the socialist brotherhood through the 
plot of The Call of the Wild... London himself had worked 
in the jute mill and had firsthand experience of the 
oppression of the capitalist system. Jack London in his War 
of the Classes observes that class struggle in a society is 
inevitable and the big fish always eat the small fish. Mark 
Seltzer (1992) investigated the superman characteristics 
of Buck; he is courageous, hard working and loyal. Cai Yigan 
(2009) holds that The Call of the Wild depicts the superman 
image of man. London was greatly impacted by the 
ideology of Marx as he observes: 
It is the prime impeachment of socialism that the 
struggle is a class struggle. The working class, in 
the process of social evolution is bound to revolt 
from the sway of the capitalist class and to 
overthrow the capitalist class. This is the menace 
of socialism, and in affirming it and in tallying an 
adopter of it. (3) 
London’s The Call of the Wild depicts the 
struggles of the middle class through the allegorical 
struggles of a dog and the critical investigation reveals the 
application of all the tenets of Marxian ideology. In 
London’s novel The Call of the Wild there are many 
different tropes within the text. Jack London deals with the 
theory of alienation, the labor theory of value and the 
theories of class struggle and the exploitation of the 
capitalists. There are levels of plot structure of The Call of 
The Wild; the relation between Buck and the traffickers is 
based on oppression and resistance. Michel Foucault in his 
book Power (200) propounds the theory of power structure 
that rules and governs the works and conducts of the 
individuals in the society in repressing way. Foucault 
oberves thus:

Power consists in taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. 
To use another metaphor, it consists in using this 
resistance as a Chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out 
their point of application and the methods (Foucault 320). 

Foucault’s main focus in his writings is the freedom of the 
individual. Foucault believes that loss of freedom is 
cancerous for the development of the individual and his 
personality. He traced the history of the institutions since 
antiqutiy denying the liberty to the individuals. In his essay on 
Power (2000) Foucault asserts thus:”They are struggles 
that question the status of the individual. The fate of Buck is 
to be the worker and the victim of the business managers 
who use every possible method to run the machinery and 
the dogs have no choice but to be subservient and obedient 
in the capitalistic set up. According to Marx “when work is 
divided in the industrial set up, each individual has an 
imposed sphere of activity from which here is no escape 
without losing the means of existence.London has a clear 
message in The Call for the Wild that the proletariats are 
bound to suffer in the modern capital system and the 
managers are oppressive, despotic and cruel. Once a 
polutariat enters into the business contract all his rights are 
scraped and he loses his individuality and becomes a cog 
of the machine. 

Jack London’s Iron’s Heel is an example of this. 
Jack London was a rebel against the society as he deviated 
from the traditional American fiction. His The War of the 
Classes depicts the incessant struggles of the middle class 
Americans. Upton Sinclair (1917) highly eulogized London 
calling him a saint and messiah of the working class 
workers. He expressed his real concern for the plight of the 
working class Americans; he tried his best in his fiction to 
save the people trapped in the abyss of darkness. He raised 
the cry of the workers and lashed at the inhuman tendencies 
of the bourgeois owning the sources of production. Jack 
London’s The Iron Heel (1908) espouses the Marxian 
ideology of Jack London and the novel excited great 
interest among his reviewers and critics. London has 
presented the Marxian views held by the proletarian hero in 
the very opening of the chapter one. The story is narrated by 
Avis Everhard’ the wife of the Socialist hero Ernest 
Everhard who laid down his life for the rights and freedom 
of the working class Americans. He was the leader of the 
second International Revolt. He launched a crusade against 
inequality, poverty, labor exploitation and the destructive
and inhuman policies of the capitalists of America. He meets the elite of the city assembled in the home of John Cunningham who is entertaining a group of ministers. During conversation he accuses them of neglecting mankind. Ava is spell-bound by the socialist ideas of Ernest Everhard who tries his best to open the eyes of the ministers present there. The plot of the novel is about a past, a present and a future. His words are fiery as he tries his best to touch their hearts and warn them of the impending revolution. He highlights the miserable condition of the working classes and their apathy about them; their main concern has been to fill their belly at the cost of the working community. He challenges Morehouse who is a Bishop and asks him to go to the quarters of the labor community to see if the Church has not ignored the command of “Feed my lambs” decreed by the Lord in the Bible. He raises the issue giving a clarion call:

So I say to you go ahead and preach and earn your pay, but for goodness’s sake leave the working class alone. You belong in the enemy’s camp. You have nothing in common with the working class. Your hands are soft with the work others have performed for you. Your stomachs are round with the plenitude of eating. (21)

Morehouse is inspired by Ernest Everhard to visit the homes of the working classes. He is shocked to observe the wretches and miserable condition of the workers and takes an oath to preach the message of truth. He decides to use his big mansion as hospital for the poor workers. He sells his house and starts living in the slums of the poor working classes to atone for the sin. The newspapers reported him as an insane person; he is hospitalized to cure the mental disease. Marx is associated with the theory of economic determinism. His theory has impacted the art and literature for a century because he believes that economic factors determine non-economic spheres of life such as politics, religion, and ideology. Man enters into a definite relationship between the forces of production and his free will. The total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society. Sara Mills in her book Michel Foucault (2003) observes that Foucault is very critical of the social and political institutions that destroy individuality and freedom. The growth of science and technology and the industrial revolution has led to the power of the machines. Human beings are treated as the robots and cogs of machines; they have lost originality and power of taking decisions.

To conclude, Jack London is a trendsetter as his socialist ideas were imitated by John Steinbeck who won the Nobel Prize and by John Dos Passos who raised the cries of the middle class workers in his epical novels; The 42nd Parallel, 1919 and The Big Money deal with the themes of class conflict. Jack London condemns the growing materialism and capitalism of America through his novels The Call of the Wild and The Iron Heels. Both the novels are famous historical documents as they narrate the history of cultural transformation exposing the oppressive policies of American capitalism.

REFERENCES


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