

# 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 indicted the capitalistic trend of the British society. In this research paper the socialistic journey of Jack London is traced who explored the tension between the growing capitalism and Marxian 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” (Bressler 172). 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. Marxist 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 million 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..[4]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 Ziezkhave been applied to interpret the socialistic vision of Jack London. Gyogry 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.[3]

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

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cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production...The need of a constantly expanding market... chases the bourgeoisie over the whole 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 capital 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 a 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 adherent 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 observes 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 antiquity 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 proletariat enters into the business contract all his rights are scrapped 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 socialistic 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 socialistic 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 epic novels; *The 42<sup>nd</sup> 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.

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