

[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2009 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

Introduction
Michael Moore: A Love Story?
Corey Dolgon¹

Moderating a Q and A for Michael Moore must be one of the easiest gigs in show biz. All you really have to do is keep order among the dozens of people raising hands to ask questions and try not to get in the way of obvious one-liners. Moore is actually much better with a live audience than he is one-on-one in studio talk-show settings where he sometimes comes off as simply argumentative or petty. The more interesting and probing peoples' questions are, the more insightful and provocative his replies. In person, he moves adeptly between the theoretical big picture and the practical, specific, and the strategic. And, of course, he's really very funny!

I had the honor and pleasure to be asked by our local Jobs with Justice Chapter to host a premier screening of Moore's new film, *Capitalism: A Love Story*, at Cambridge, Massachusetts. He had two earlier screenings in downtown Boston and arrived at the Harvard Square Theater about three-quarters of the way through the final showing. I had a few words with him as the final credits rolled, and he was very personable and humble. But he also looked exhausted.

He had been on the road for weeks promoting the film at festivals in Venice, Italy, Toronto, Canada, and Sonoma, California. He had also recently appeared on every talk show from Larry King and Jay Leno to Jimmy Kimmel, Charlie Rose, and Tavis Smiley. He even took on one of Fox News' Right-Wing hacks, Sean Hannity, in a mano-a-mano slugfest over the merits of capitalism. It wasn't a fair fight—Moore reads more than talking points and his rapier wit animates compared to Hannity's bludgeoning puffery. In an emblematic moment, Hannity tried to make a point about government spending by suggesting that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin had warned Americans about putting their child-

¹ **Corey Dolgon**, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at Worcester State College and Assistant Editor of *Theory in Action*.

ren in debt. Moore fired back that the founding fathers had saved their most scathing critiques for the rich because, "as wealthy men, they knew what the wealthy would do to people if they were completely in charge." Hannity replied, that's not true, that's not true."

Of course it was true. Most of the founding fathers had a serious mistrust for great wealth and power—they had just fought a revolution and built a democracy. While we might argue about the "bourgeois nature" of that revolution, they were clearly skeptical of monarchy and oligarchy. In one of his most famous quotations, Jefferson explained, "There is...an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents.... The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provisions should be made to prevent its ascendancy." So much for George W. Bush. Even more importantly, they feared massive inequality and the detrimental impact economic disparities would cause. Jefferson and Madison both argued for graduated income taxes with Madison suggesting that governments should use "laws to reduce extreme wealth towards a state of mediocrity and raise extreme indigence towards a state of comfort."

Hannity pounded Moore asking how he could "trust government so much," suggesting it was incompetent and only capable of stifling economic growth and creativity. For Hannity, only the freedom and power of unregulated capitalism could explain why the United States had succeeded in achieving such high standards of living. Moore fought back that generations of immigrants would never have "made it" without the help of government sponsored education, employment programs, health and safety programs and anti-poverty programs. He could have added labor unions and social movements, but his overall message was clear—It was not capitalism that created a higher quality of life in the United States, it was the people themselves who organized to fight for it. Moore's argument reminded me of something an old friend, Economist and Columnist Mark Weisbrot used to say: "Government can do good things for people when it's democratically accountable to its constituents and follows the old journalists' adage of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." Can you imagine trying to make that argument to the Fox News family whose bread and butter is socialism for the rich and libertarianism for the poor. No wonder Moore was exhausted.

Ironically, one of Moore's most notable features in the 20 years since *Roger and Me* has been his indefatigable spirit and his downright monumental productivity. He has produced 9 feature films (including Oscar award winner *Bowling for Columbine* and Oscar nominee, *Sicko*), written 7 books (including three best-sellers, *Dude Where's My Country*, *Stupid*

White Men, and *Downsize This!*), and produced and directed two television series (*TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*). Meanwhile, he maintains a website and contributes weekly letters, essays, and editorials to magazines and newspapers around the world. As important as his work has been for shaping some of the contemporary American Left's vision and rhetoric, he continues to be an imposing figure at political rallies, anti-war and pro-labor demonstrations, and college campuses. He is one of our generations' true public intellectuals, political artists, and democratic [small 'd'] activists.

Despite his huge persona (and he has been rightfully criticized for having an overbearing screen presence in his films—not because of his weight but because of his personality and “screen ego”), his message is always about the crucial role that we all must play in the political and social life of our nation. At the Cambridge screening, he reminded the audience that, “democracy is not a spectator sport, it is a participatory event.” He wondered aloud if he had disappointed some in the audience with the film's final message—not that capitalism must be replaced by socialism so much as it needs to be supplanted by real democracy. But his thematic vision has never been about utopian systems as much as it has been about the individual's ability to get a fair shake, a good job, and a decent life. Thus, while his analysis sometimes smacks of an almost vulgar Marxism, his public voice sounds more like a cross between Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Gary Cooper in *Meet John Doe* and Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

While funny and poignant, his main line of reasoning is always about the power that people should and must have to make this country (or any country for that matter) work. As the evening came to an end Moore was asked if he was disappointed by Obama's first months in office. He replied that, while he would have liked to see a more progressive direction—including a stronger position on single payer health care and a withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan—he also realized what Obama was up against. He then tried to articulate a fine, but difficult line of political action. On the one hand, he believed that the left should support Obama in general while organizing effectively to voice a strong anti-corporate, progressive peace agenda.

Such a line is inevitably blurred, however, as evidenced by his recent couplet of letters written to Obama on the occasion of his Nobel Peace Prize. On October 9th he wrote, “Congratulations President Obama on the Nobel Peace Prize, Now Earn It!” where he declared: “One thing is certain through all revolutions by people who wish to be free -- they ultimately have to bring about that freedom themselves. Others can be sup-

portive, but freedom cannot be delivered from the front seat of someone else's Humvee. You have to end our involvement in Afghanistan now. If you don't, you'll have no choice but to return the prize to Oslo." The very next day though he decided he may have been too harsh and that Americans should clearly celebrate what much of the rest of the world was celebrating, that the U.S. has a smart man in the White House with good intentions. Still, he concluded: "Instead of waiting to see what the president is going to do, we all need to be pro-active and push the agenda that we want to see enacted. What keeps us from forming the same local groups we put together to get out the vote last November? C'mon! We're the majority now -- the majority by a significant margin! We call the shots -- and we need to tell this wimpy Congress to get busy and do what we say -- or else." What is becoming clearer is that very soon Michael Moore and other powerful voices on the Left may have to figure out just what "or else" means.

What I enjoy about editing *Theory in Action* is that in each issue we bring forth articles that in one way or another seem to address these very questions of people acting together to create new visions of or strategies for democracy. This issue is no exception as we begin with an outstanding article from Christian Schlareth and John Murphy on labor organizing at the University of Miami. While the article begins by placing the case within the context of the corporate academy and the inherent and inevitable subsequent contradictions, the authors use the specifics of the struggle to remind us that the power of organizing and solidarity is still the lynchpin for success in the fight against capitalism and corporate greed. Although the authors are clear in recognizing the power of ideology, authority and fear to stifle such organizing, they contend that partnerships among students, faculty and staff can and do bring down administrations. They conclude with a "call for faculty and students to return their universities to what they were meant to be: spaces for public discourse on democracy and critical thinking."

In "Resurrecting Smelser: Collective Power, Generalized Belief, and Hegemonic Spaces" by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur, the author inspires us to rethink how we understand organizing oppositional groups and movements in order to articulate grievances and fight for change. To do this, Arthur revisits the sociological theories of Neil Smelser and suggests that by adding a more critical view of power (as borrowed from Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci and post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault) Smelser's work can shed new light on the difficult question of how oppressed and powerless people *do* come to question hegemonic power and act to change their conditions. She accepts Anthropologist

James Scott's contention that discontent and protest may always exist in the "hidden transcripts" of social life, but Arthur concludes, that we must ultimately "account for how and why grievances emerge when they do, so that we can understand how it is that movements themselves ever do manage to arise."

But what happens to social movements once they lose their radical impact on political structures and ideologies? The aftermath of such struggles from the late 1960s presents a stage from which Iris Mendel observes the historical evolution of feminism and feminist theory. In particular, Mendel wants to pursue the ways in which late 1960s Feminist challenges, despite their more tangible movement demise, resulted in significant and fundamental epistemic shifts. Still, Mendel is somewhat disappointed in noting that a substantive epistemic revolution within sociology in particular and the academy in general has not occurred to the degree one might have expected. Still, she concludes, we may be "looking in the wrong places... we may have to move beyond academic boundaries in order to appraise the potential of feminist and other critical epistemologies and look at what Demirovic calls "new epistemic forms" or what Caffentzis and Federici refer to as "knowledge commons" – including social movements which created feminist epistemologies in the first place."

In taking on capitalism itself, Colin Williams ponders the triumphalism of neoliberal globalization narratives that "the market is reaching ever further into every crevice of daily life has led many to conclude that there is 'no alternative' to a commodified world. " Instead, he argues that the non-market realm has been identified [and] if anything, has grown rather than diminished relative to the market sphere, thus raising doubts about whether the market is so victorious, colonizing and all-powerful as many previously assumed." Williams peels away the capitalist obfuscation of the markets' limitations and proposed that such a deconstruction is necessary for we are to consider the real possibility of an alternative to global corporate hegemony.

We also have a shorter paper from Nicholas Alexiou's on "Religious and Ethnic Identities: The Romaniote (Greek) Jews in the US," that explores the cultural experiences of Jewish Greeks to the United States, as well as a host of book reviews. We hope you enjoy these offerings and consider this journal not only as a reader but as a contributor. As we celebrate Michael Moore's work and feature some of our own fine writers, the message of action and engagement is clear. Democracy must start right here, right now, wherever you are with whatever tools you have. We bring our theory to action, informing our strategies for struggle and

Corey Dolgon

re-envisioning what we want the world to be. We hope you join us in this endeavor.