

Part Three

Class and American Film



Introduction to Part Three

What is Class?

Class is a term used to categorize people according to their economic status. It thus frequently involves a consideration of income level, type of profession, inherited wealth and family lineage, and a diffusely understood idea of “social standing.” Historically, most societies have made distinctions among their members according to some kind of class division. Under such **class systems**, citizens are very aware of their class standing or social worth. Class standing can form a strong basis for a person’s overall identity, much as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality also contribute to one’s sense of self. For example, people raised as members of the so-called **working class** (associated with physical labor, or industrial or blue-collar jobs) may carry aspects of that identity throughout their lives, even if they shift in income level to the professional or **middle class** (more associated with administrative, managerial, or white-collar jobs that require advanced university education). A strong class system helps keep a society’s power structure in place, **hegemonically** encouraging members of each class to stay where they are in the socio-economic hierarchy.

Compared to some nations (for example, historical England or India), the United States likes to think it does not have a strongly defined class system. One of the many reasons the 13 colonies broke away from England in the first place was a revolt over the strictness of the British class system. By repudiating the concept that certain persons were endowed by God with a divine right to power and

wealth, the fledgling United States of America asserted that “all men were created equal.” (However, remember that the framers of the Constitution felt that only *white men* that owned land should have equal access to wealth and power.) In its formation, the United States attempted to reject England’s rigid class system and replace it with a system that would purportedly allow all individuals to accumulate wealth and rise in class standing according to their ability and ambition. Citizens of the United States were not to be hampered by a mental conception of their “place.” This national concept – the freedom to pursue happiness without socio-economic class barriers – has often been called the **American Dream**, and over the years this dream has come to be shared by women and people of color as well as white men. Closely tied to the American Dream is the ideology of **rugged individualism**, wherein each citizen is expected to take responsibility for his or her own success. This emphasis on individualism also works against a sense of a shared class identity.

To this day, America takes a certain pride in considering itself a “classless” society, but it is wrong to think that the nation has no class issues. Class standing still matters to most Americans, whether or not they admit it. The dominant economic organization of the United States is and always has been **capitalism**, a system based on economic competition among individuals – and more recently, economic competition among corporations, a state of affairs now referred to as **corporate capitalism**. Just as the concept of **whiteness** is so endemic to American culture that it often goes unnoticed, the pervasiveness of capitalism often makes it difficult for Americans to recognize its omnipresence. Under capitalism in general, success is measured by wealth and the things it can buy, including power. Economic standing is arguably the most important gauge for assessing a person’s social worth. Thus, throughout the twentieth century, the American Dream has often been defined in terms of material wealth – owning land, one or more homes, several cars, expensive jewelry and clothing, and so forth. More modestly, the American Dream can simply be freedom from want, in addition to the numerous other freedoms (speech, assembly, religion, the pursuit of happiness) guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Yet these freedoms for all citizens to do or say what they want, or live as they might desire, are usually tied to economic success: the more money one has, the more ability one has to do or say what one wants.

Put simply, in America those with the most wealth have the most privilege and the most power. Wealthy families – those of the **upper classes** – use their positions of advantage to keep or increase their economic status (and thus their power) over generations. They attend the best schools, are placed in good jobs, and can hire the best lawyers, doctors, and economic advisors. By making large contributions to political campaigns, supporting lobbying efforts, and buying media time to promote candidates who share their points of view, the wealthy are able to get advantageous tax and business laws passed. While a wealthy individual may not intentionally attempt to oppress others, such oppression can result. For example, laws that ease pollution standards or safety requirements in factories directly benefit the owners of these companies (who do not have to spend the extra money required for compliance), and such actions may have a directly adverse affect on people working in or living

near the factories. Even stronger examples can be drawn from business executives who work to keep the level of the basic hourly wage at a minimum, or avoid paying health insurance for their employees. The effect of these laws and business practices works to keep lower-income groups locked into their socio-economic place, while corporations, business owners, and stock holders continue to benefit monetarily.

More broadly, capitalism and rugged individualism encourage Americans to compete rather than cooperate with one another. We are taught to assess other people by their economic status, or more simply give in to the feeling that we must “keep up with the Joneses,” that is, be as materially successful as our neighbors. The success or capability of the United States itself is often measured by its corporate economic power. During the 1950s, the common political opinion that “What’s good for General Motors is good for the country” directly linked national strength to corporate business strength. Similar attitudes persist to the present day, as can be seen in the importance of the stock market as an indicator of American stability and strength. When Islamic terrorists attacked the United States in the fall of 2001, various analysts advised citizens to buy stock in order to keep the market up and thus show the world that the terrorists had not succeeded in hurting the nation.

While most Americans would readily acknowledge the importance of material success in their lives, far fewer want to admit that our unwritten class system may actually work to curtail or corrupt American ideals. While basing one’s core identity on a class standing *is* a **social construct**, one’s class standing *does* exist and have a concrete and material effect on one’s life, even if one denies it. A lack of **class consciousness** (an awareness of a class system and one’s place within it) empowers the dominant **ideology** of capitalism as much as a strongly defined class system. Capitalist ideologies work to disarm, mask, or suppress any possible complaints based on class inequity. Except during periods of depression or recession, American mass culture largely ignores the existence of economic hardship. The news media rarely covers poverty, hunger, or economic disparity – except during the holidays for a “feel-good” piece on middle-class or corporate charity showing the benevolence of capitalism and the American Dream. Such benevolence cannot be relied on, though, as many individuals rebuff requests from homeless people and concertedly try to ignore their very existence. Americans can even deny their own economic oppression. Studies show that most of the population self-identifies as middle-class, even though statistically many of those individuals would be placed into lower classes on the basis of their yearly salaries. (The term “lower-class” itself ascribes to a hierarchy that American capitalism tries to efface.) Self-identifying as middle-class may help to keep people from considering themselves discriminated against or disempowered.

The propagation of the American Dream suggests that the only thing holding a person back from wealth (and thus happiness) is their own lack of drive and determination. Some Americans are quick to blame individuals for economic hardship, overlooking the role that capitalism might play in the creation and perpetuation of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. The myth of the American Dream

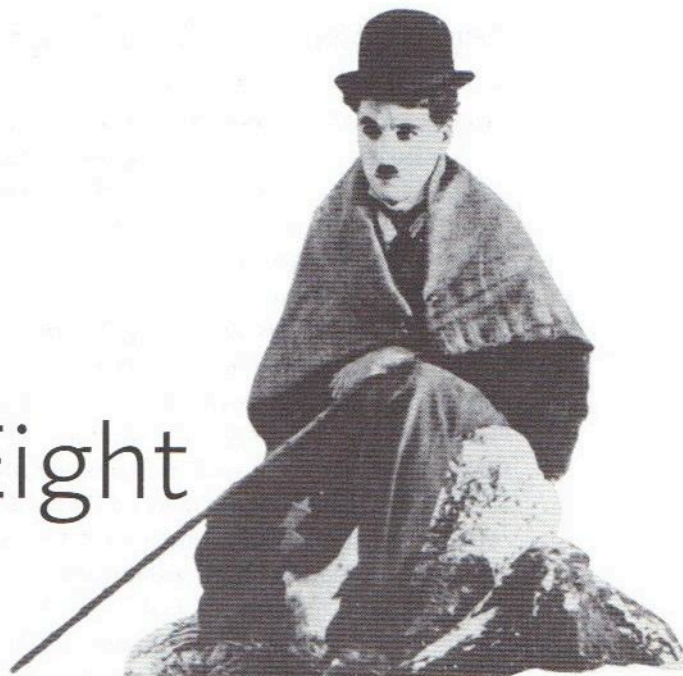
coincides with the traditions of the **Protestant work ethic**, which dates back to the colonial era and equates hard work and devotion to labor with goodness and devotion to God. According to the Protestant work ethic, if one works hard enough, one will be rewarded by God both in this life and in the next. Some argue that the ethic encourages the wealthy to engage in charity (thus helping support and spread the American Dream). Others, though, have often used the ethic to argue the exact opposite: poverty is God's punishment for an individual's ignorance, laziness, or sin, and thus should not be rewarded with charity. Other socio-cultural concepts examined in this book are often used as excuses for failed capitalist endeavor. For example, since American success is tied to the notion of rugged individualism, *lack of material success* is often thought to reveal insufficient masculinity (which, according to traditional standards, should be *very rugged* and *very individual*).

Seemingly in response to this implied criticism (less economically successful men are somehow inadequate), many economically struggling groups in the United States place a heavy importance on masculine strength and ability. "Machismo" is often a strong component of working-class cultures, whether white or non-white. Popular culture debates also invoke **stereotypical** ideas of race and ethnicity to avoid a potential critique of capitalism, constructing minorities as "inherently" ignorant, lazy, or corrupt. In this way, racism is used to mask capitalism's failures, when in fact racist practices can and do *create* economic disparity when non-white people are discriminated against in hiring and promotion. All of these ideological currents work to obscure and uphold the complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics of **white patriarchal capitalism**. They tend to blame individuals for social problems that may instead be caused by the ignorance, prejudice, greed, and/or economic exploitation that capitalist ideologies create and foster.

Most cultural studies of class are derived from **Marxism**, so named for economic theorist Karl Marx. Over 100 years ago, Marx argued that economic systems (such as capitalism) form the **base** of society, and that everything in the **superstructure** of a society (that is, those ideological institutions that arise from its economic base, such as law, culture, and media) must necessarily reflect and endorse the economic system that produced them. Thus one can see that there may be economic imperatives at the base of superstructural concepts such as racism and **sexism**. For example, the American colonial economy was strongly tied to the institution of slavery, and thus many historians have argued that racial stratification developed to justify this form of capitalist exploitation. Also, a sense of male superiority helps to justify treating women as property or goods to be traded from father to husband. Following these ideas about base and superstructure, one can understand how American films (produced as part of a capitalist economic base) must repeatedly construct superstructural representations that uphold and celebrate capitalism. The next two chapters will show how class difference in American society has been represented in American film, as well as how capitalist imperatives have affected the film industry itself.

Chapter Eight

Classical Hollywood Cinema and Class



As per basic Marxism, American culture has consistently produced images that reflect its **capitalist** economic base, and its motion pictures are certainly part of this dynamic. This chapter will describe and analyze the myths of class and wealth concocted prior to and during the classical Hollywood era, as well as those historical moments when national or industrial changes posed a challenge to the stability of those myths. Broadly speaking, American popular cinema has always centered on and dramatized the middle and upper classes, mostly as a way of supporting and celebrating capitalism. The stories that Hollywood told, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, *did* admit that economic stratification existed in the United States. However, rather than critiquing aspects of class oppression inherent in capitalism, most of those films went on to show how easily such stratification could be overcome. Hollywood's ability to fabricate optimistic tales of economic success in the national marketplace extended well beyond the screen. At the same time as audiences thrilled to stories about able-bodied young men climbing the rungs of the economic ladder, they also fantasized about Hollywood itself as a land of opportunity. And although studio executives routinely exploited their employees, the film industry consistently publicized itself as a prime example of the American Dream fulfilled.

Setting the Stage: The Industrial Revolution

Almost from the nation's birth, American writers, artists, and politicians fashioned an image of America as a land exploding with economic potential. The vast resources of the American territories seemed large enough for all individuals to fulfill their dreams. Yet economic disparity existed from colonial days. Almost all Americans of African descent were enslaved and denied the chance to rise economically. Native Americans were considered less than human and also not invited to share in the nation's potential wealth. Women were, for the most part, economically dependent upon their husbands. Even white men were at times kept as **indentured servants**, *de facto* slaves created by a legal contract. The economic disparities felt by some citizens in the years immediately following the Revolution spurred a number of local uprisings, such as Shay's Rebellion (1786) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1794). Still, belief in the American Dream helped quell potential class antagonisms, and its promise spread throughout the world, eventually luring hundreds of thousands of immigrants from around the globe to a country where the streets were thought to be "paved with gold."

Throughout the nineteenth century, as the nation expanded westward, America continued to be figured as a land of endlessly renewable opportunities. If a man faced failure where he was, he could pick up his belongings and move further west to begin again. Visions of cheap land in Oklahoma or Oregon, or of gold in California or Alaska, encouraged people to migrate west in search of success. By the end of the 1800s, however, the limits of the American West had been defined and the promise of the frontier was being closed off. Farmers and other non-urban folk grew increasingly dependent on (and indebted to) urban banks for loans and mortgages, and to big city industries for processing and manufacturing their raw goods. If crops failed, and farmers were unable to make their mortgage payments, banks could and would foreclose on their homes. If Wall Street traders sensed overproduction, prices on crops would fall, resulting in less money being returned to the farmers. Rural areas were also dominated by major coal or oil companies that employed the local citizenry in dangerous work for long hours and low pay.

While rural America faced these challenges, the nation was also experiencing an enormous surge in urban populations. By the early 1900s, more Americans lived in and around cities than in rural areas. A number of factors fueled this increase. First, new populations of immigrants from Europe were settling in major Eastern cities. Second, more and more African Americans were moving from Southern farms to Northern cities in hopes of better jobs and less racial oppression. Lastly, the **Industrial Revolution** greatly increased the number of jobs available in urban centers. It required a redefinition in the concept of "work" itself. Before this era, the typical mode of work was artisanal: individual workers (with apprentices perhaps) plied a skilled trade, hand-making whole items such as shirts, clocks, earthenware, etc. The shift to an industrial mode meant moving to a system in which individuals each performed a small part of the manufacturing process. For example, one

worker would only sew shirt collars, another only attach buttons, and so forth. This industrial system, aided by new machines and better power sources, substantially speeded up the rate of production, but also made workers dependent on factory managers and company owners for their livelihood. Workers were increasingly treated like cogs in a machine, doing menial labor for long hours and low pay, in factories with little or no safety code. Many workers (including children) lost their hearing, their limbs, or their lives in factory accidents or fires.

The Industrial Revolution thus brought with it a widespread exploitation of workers, both in America and around the world. Various social reform groups began protesting against these developments, creating agrarian cooperatives, denouncing big business, and forming the first modern-day **labor unions**. Unions are formed when disempowered workers band together as a collective in order to seek better wages or improved working conditions. In forming a union, workers unite in a shared struggle against their economic exploitation. Unions faced (and still do face) strong opposition from the capitalist bosses whose power they would seek to mitigate. From the early twentieth century, unions have been repeatedly outlawed by federal and state legislatures, and portrayed as anti-American in the mass media. Newspapers, controlled by big businesses, consistently portrayed early union organizers as traitorous, morally bereft, or just plain stupid. Playing on **nationalist** and **ethnic** antagonisms, images in editorial cartoons pictured labor agitators as threatening foreign anarchists or as rural malcontents who were too busy looking backward to see the advantages of the modern industrial era. From its earliest days, American cinema often fell into similar modes of **representation**, replicating the images and **ideologies** of the other mass media.

Early Cinema: The Rise of the Horatio Alger Myth

The mass production created by the Industrial Revolution also mandated the growth of mass consumption, and American culture devised low-cost pleasures and entertainments that working men and women could enjoy. Arcades, amusement parks, vaudeville theaters, and dime museums flourished at this time. So did cinema. **Thomas Edison's** first attempt at motion pictures, **kinetoscopes**, were peep-show films that were placed in storefronts at boardwalks and other urban working-class districts. Many of the earliest **nickelodeons** were also converted storefronts in the middle of immigrant or working-class neighborhoods. Although Edison and his colleagues were not from the working classes, the entertainments they produced (including films of cockfights, boxing matches, female exotic dancers, muscle men, and city street scenes) were what they *thought* the urban lower classes would enjoy.

While it is easy to read such business decisions as condescending, a number of early films were very conscious of the attitudes and outlooks of immigrant and working-class spectators. Some of these early films point out the disparity in treatment between the lower and upper classes, and how the law was rarely on the side

of poor people. *The Kleptomaniac* (1905), for example, compares a wealthy woman being slapped on the wrist for attempting to steal a watch with a starving woman being thrown in jail for trying to take a loaf of bread. *One is Business, the Other Crime* (1912) draws a similar parallel: it contrasts a poor man's turn to overt thievery with a tycoon's legal machinations to take other people's money. Films such as *The Moonshiner* (1904) demonstrated sympathy for poor folks trying to survive, even when it meant working outside the law. Police were sometimes figured as enforcers of an unjust economic system, as hired guns who broke up union meetings and treated workers unfairly. Many early comedies depict policemen as inept and bumbling, a tradition that would carry into the famous Keystone Kops comedies of the 1910s and 1920s. Even some of Edison's films could inadvertently disparage police officers. A short entitled *Move On* (1903) was sold to theaters as an urban market scene with "amusing" immigrants being lorded over by a cop on the beat. Yet immigrant audiences could easily have reversed the intended power dynamics and understood the cop as the interloper into *their* community.

Many of these films and others like them drew heavily from the traditions of **muck-raking journalism**, a practice that exposed in sensationalistic terms the injustices visited upon immigrants and the working class. At the same time, some films also tapped into a movement known as **Populism**, which had become a major force in American politics during the 1890s. Populism grew out of the rural population's discontent with the Industrial Revolution. It critiqued the modern, industrial society and advocated a return to agrarian values based on collective brotherhood rather than selfish money-grubbing. Based predominantly in the South and the Midwest, Populism's call for social change linked itself to issues of patriotism and Christianity, rather than a shared sense of economic struggle. One of D. W. Griffith's early films, *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), has strong ties to both rural Populism and urban muckraking journalism (specifically Upton Sinclair's literary exposé of the meatpacking industry, *The Jungle*). Griffith's film tells the story of a wealthy businessman speculating in wheat futures, whose business machinations make him rich even as they push farming families to the brink of starvation. The film uses cross cutting (editing back and forth between two separate story strands) to contrast the tycoon's wealthy urban society with the poor farming community. In the end, the tycoon is ironically killed as he becomes trapped in a silo and buried alive in wheat. At the end of the film, even though the individual businessman has died, his rich colleagues are still feasting on a sumptuous banquet while the farmers huddle around a meager meal.

As narrative cinema developed throughout the first decades of the century, one type of story formula rose to prominence, becoming so popular it became known as the **Horatio Alger myth**. Horatio Alger was a former New England minister who wrote **dime novels** – cheap, often sensationalistic books that working men could afford. Alger's stories recounted the exploits of street urchins who rose to the top levels of society, often with the charitable aid of a kindly benefactor. Starting with little or nothing but a "get-up-and-go" attitude, Alger's heroes (always white and male) were rewarded for their gumption by gaining a successful career in industry,

a valuable fortune, and the camaraderie of other businessmen. Alger's very popular novels reworked the American Dream for turn-of-the-century urban America, and helped disseminate the idea that anyone (male) could succeed in America if he simply tried hard enough. Early cinema quickly picked up this narrative formula, and films expressing the Horatio Alger myth can be found throughout American film history, from early silent films such as *The 100-to-1 Shot* (1906) and *Barney Oldfield's Race for Life* (1913) to the latest Hollywood blockbuster. In many ways, the Horatio Alger myth is the basis for **classical Hollywood narrative form**, in which white male heroes with consistent pluck and determination overcome hardship or villainy and obtain (economic) success by the end of the film.

Concurrent with the development of narrative cinema, the exhibition of movies took place in nickelodeon theaters, most of which were located in urban, working-class, and/or immigrant communities. White middle-class Americans were told that villainy, alcoholism, and drug use occurred in nickelodeons, and that women could be accosted and even kidnapped in such places. Middle-class reformers began to target nickelodeons as dens of iniquity that needed to be shut down. At one point, the New York City police department closed down all of the city's nickelodeons, while in other places they were shut down because of safety regulations. While safety was a genuine issue (the flammability of early celluloid film caused many tragic fires), many of the claims about the early movie houses were obviously exaggerated. Such claims were meant to play on white middle-class fears of immigrants and working-class people, and, in so doing, worked to keep people of different ethnic and class backgrounds from interacting socially.

With the reputation of the film industry under attack, both exhibitors and producers turned away from their working-class constituency and attempted to assuage and woo the middle class. Throughout the 1910s, this shift was accomplished by building opulent theaters (the so-called **movie palaces**) in middle-class neighborhoods and by making films that focused on middle-class characters. The films of D. W. Griffith mark the shift in American film away from a predominantly working-class audience to one of middle-class sensibilities. While his earlier films (such as *A Corner in Wheat* or *One is Business, the Other Crime*) often made explicit critiques of unchecked capitalism, his later films increasingly uphold middle-class values. While they still tend to draw comparisons between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the modern industrial age, many of Griffith's later films suggest that chastity, temperance, and hard work are the solutions to complex socio-economic problems, and not some sort of organized working class. For example, the strike shown in *Intolerance* (1916) only leads to death and grief for the characters, whereas following the Golden Rule brings salvation. Significantly, some of Griffith's films use middle-class Christian dogma as an ideological apparatus to quell working-class dissent in the same manner he used Christianity to justify the overt racism in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), as discussed in Chapter 4.

By the end of World War I, American cinema had become a widespread, mainstream entertainment, employing the Horatio Alger myth and espousing middle-class values that celebrated the riches that could be accumulated (by some)



Harold Lloyd (right) was silent cinema's middle-class everyman. His predicament here is typical, but he will climb the ladder of success by the end of the film.

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection

under capitalism. Even women of the 1920s could be included in these Horatio Alger tales, and Hollywood films told stories of secretaries or shop clerks “living the American Dream” by finding and marrying a rich businessman. The myth was also apparent in any number of silent film comedies. In the films of slapstick comedians Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, **protagonists** overcome incredible (and often hilariously outlandish) obstacles in order to win respect and success. Through dogged determination and humorous strokes of fortune, these comic characters inevitably proved their abilities and fulfilled the American Dream. **Harold Lloyd**, in his persona as an energetic, young, American middle-class everyman, was the most popular comedian in the United States during the 1920s. His most famous film, *Safety Last* (1923), shows the hero as a junior executive at a department store who is trying to get a promotion and thus have enough money to marry his girlfriend. Although he is continually faced with setbacks, including a famous climb up the side of the department store building – a climb that visually echoes his climb to success – Lloyd's protagonist succeeds in all his goals and is rewarded by his boss for his efforts. Perfectly



Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp," seen here in *The Gold Rush* (1925), acknowledged the economic inequities that most Hollywood films either ignored or suggested could be easily overcome.

The Gold Rush, copyright © 1925, United Artists

embodying the 1920s version of the Horatio Alger myth, Lloyd's films demonstrate how Hollywood filmmaking had for the most part abandoned a working-class view of urban life in favor of middle-class attitudes.

One silent film comedian stood apart from these social currents, and by and large continued to make films that espoused the viewpoint of the economically dispossessed. In his character of "The Little Tramp," **Charlie Chaplin** created powerful images of life outside the system. (Chaplin's attention to economic hardship was perhaps due in large part to his impoverished childhood in Great Britain, where class stratification was more manifest in the social consciousness.) In film after film (both shorts and features), Chaplin's Tramp snubs middle-class life in favor of the freedom of the open road. He often battles comically with people who symbolize middle- or upper-class values, such as snooty butlers, wealthy dowagers, and the police force. The Tramp's ingenuity usually triumphed over the haughtiness and bullying of his antagonists, yet Chaplin's films did not ignore the realities of economic hardship. For example, in *The Gold Rush* (1925), Chaplin's starving Tramp is reduced to eating his own shoe, a powerful image of the failure of the American Dream. Films like *Easy Street* (1917), *The Immigrant* (1917), *The Kid* (1922), *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) may have romanticized poverty to a degree

(for comic effect), but they also communicated the desperate circumstances that still faced many Americans. And unlike the films of Harold Lloyd, Chaplin's Tramp rarely enacted the Horatio Alger success story, marking these silent comedies as an exception to the rule of popular Hollywood cinema.

The influence of the Alger myth on cinema extends well beyond actual film narratives: the Hollywood industry itself became regarded as an embodiment of the myth. While white Anglo-Saxon men (such as Thomas Edison) dominated the early years of cinema, by the end of the 1910s a number of poor immigrant entrepreneurs, mainly of Jewish descent, had become major power brokers in the business. Starting in relative obscurity, these men parlayed their economic beginnings (mostly running nickelodeons in ghetto neighborhoods) into film production companies. By the 1920s, they were the heads of major Hollywood studios. Their remarkably swift climb up the economic ladder appeared to supply evidence of the opportunities that the United States provided for impoverished but eager individuals. Similarly, movie-fan magazines gushed about the overnight success stories of movie stars. From the 1910s until the end of the classical studio age in the 1950s (and even to a degree after), issue after issue of fan magazines told avid readers how relative nobodies were picked out of nowhere to become screen idols: how Hollywood had made their lives into a Horatio Alger story. For example, Joan Crawford was a young working-class woman who happened to win a beauty contest that got her noticed by MGM executives, who transformed her into a star. Lana Turner was famously "discovered" sitting at the counter of a soda shop and whisked into a life of Hollywood glamor. Before **Rock Hudson** became one of Hollywood's leading romantic idols, he had been working as a truck driver. Such romantic versions of success or stardom enticed many aspiring men and women to abandon their less-than-promising jobs for Hollywood. They were hoping that luck might shine on them as well, but the reality behind the myth was somewhat darker than they had been led to believe.

Hollywood and Unionization

The business practices of Hollywood during its classical period were frequently harsh and exploitative, and the struggle to unionize various aspects of the film industry throughout the 1920s and 1930s proved to be difficult and fraught with strife. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it was common for big businesses to use their clout with state and federal governments to legislate against unionization. Union organizers were branded anarchists, communists, and foreign agitators – every term that could image them as "un-American." The film industry was no different in its outlook on unions than any other major industry of the era. Although the heads of the new studios had themselves come from lower-class backgrounds and had fought to make their own place in the industry against more established businessmen, these same individuals, once they came to power, sought

to close off competition and exploit their employees. Fan magazines may have publicized Hollywood as a land where dreams came true, but the major studios worked tirelessly to keep unions from helping the average film worker achieve those dreams. Although not the only factor, one of the reasons movie moguls centered their industry in southern California was that, unlike the East Coast, unions had not yet gained significant strength there. Consequently, the studios could pay day laborers much less money and force them to work under less stringent workplace regulations (thus keeping budgets lower and profits higher). This type of exploitation extended to actors as well. Non-contract actors were often made to work 15 hours or more each day. Some companies refused to pay actors for days in which they were not actually photographed, even if they were out on location for a production.

By the end of the 1920s, unionization loomed as a greater threat to the Hollywood studios. After World War I, a number of small unions, centering on one specific craft, attempted to gain a foothold, and they began to call for strikes against the studios. **IATSE (International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees)** added “and Motion Picture Machine Operators” to its union title and declared itself an industry-wide union for all behind-the-camera workers. The studios responded in a number of fashions. Employees were often fired if it was discovered that they had attended a union meeting, even if they had not become members. The studios also hired thugs to threaten or beat up union organizers. Executives played the small unions off against each other, agreeing to recognize one union over its competitors if the chosen union would accept less pay and longer hours. The **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS)**, while best known for its Oscar awards, was formed by Hollywood executives in 1926 initially to function as an “in-house” union, thus preventing any outside parties from taking away control. Lastly, the studio system itself created a social and economic hierarchy among different film workers, so that certain people considered themselves middle- or upper-class artists (directors, actors, writers) and not working-class laborers (set builders, lighting technicians, custodial employees, etc.). This stratification helped to keep varied studio employees from seeing a shared cause against the executives. Artists frequently disdained the blue-collar laborers, and laborers distrusted the artists.

The year 1926 also saw the debut of the **Studio Basic Agreement**. This agreement granted recognition to IATSE and some other small craft unions, but left the film industry as an **open shop** in which the studios could still hire non-union workers. While this might have seemed to be a satisfactory solution for all involved, the relationship between the studios and unions remained (and remains) divisive. The 1926 Studio Basic Agreement left many workers in the industry (including actors, writers, directors, and animators) still without a union. Furthermore, as IATSE gained power, it often collaborated with the studios to crush smaller unions, regardless of the needs of individual workers. During the 1930s, IATSE was overrun by organized crime, and the union squeezed money out of its members and gave them little support in return. Evidence suggests that the studios even paid bribes to corrupt IATSE officials in order to keep the union from striking, and in 1941, Willie Bioff and George Browne of IATSE were indicted for racketeering in the film industry. This

corrupt system allowed the major studios to continue to exert inordinate control over their employees, even as it appeared that they were acquiescing to labor's demands.

The entire motion picture industry faced great economic hardship with the onset of the **Great Depression** in the early 1930s. The heady economic optimism of the 1920s came tumbling down with the stock market crash of 1929. Almost overnight, people's savings were wiped out. Thousands were suddenly unemployed, with no prospect of a new job on the horizon. Banks failed. Mortgages on farms and houses were foreclosed, creating a surge of homelessness. Many Americans began to doubt the benefits of unchecked capitalism, and the Depression was increasingly understood by many as caused by greedy businessmen and the manipulations of unscrupulous stock speculators. People began to view bankers, stock brokers, and corporate executives as the enemy. Further outrage grew out of President Hoover's decision to let American businesses themselves handle the crisis, instead of stepping in to help the victims and punish those who had caused the calamity. When jobless World War I veterans marched on Washington DC in 1932, President Hoover called out the army to quell what he thought was an insurrection. The American Dream as espoused by Horatio Alger was exposed as a myth and not reality.

At the movies, attendance slumped, and almost all the Hollywood studios found themselves deep in debt (most even had to declare a form of bankruptcy). Having just taken out major loans from banking institutions to purchase theaters and pay for the conversion to sound, the heads of the studios now were overseen by New York businessmen, who pressured for cost reduction. To stem their economic losses, the studios laid off hundreds of workers and initiated drastic pay cuts, regardless of union agreements. Such actions shocked and radicalized many film workers at all levels of production – carpenters, writers, and actors alike. In response, new labor organizations began to coalesce, much to the studios' displeasure. Some film workers (as did many Americans in general) began learning about **socialism** and **communism**, searching for a viable alternative to the seemingly failing and dishonest practices of industrial capitalism. Only the intervention of newly elected President Roosevelt's **National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA)** gave workers some security. The NIRA guaranteed workers a minimum wage and a maximum number of hours they could be asked to work, as well as the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing. In light of this, 1933 saw the formation of the **Screen Actors Guild** and the **Writers Guild of America**. A few years later, the **Directors Guild of America** was formed. (Note the use of the term "guild" here instead of "union": this reinforced the sense that these particular workers were artists, and further divided them from laborers and labor unions.) Not surprisingly, the studios fought against such organizing, and they even benefited from parts of the NIRA. For example, while the NIRA guaranteed certain rights to organized labor, it also protected industries from anti-trust lawsuits, and thus Hollywood's **oligopoly** could not be legally challenged. By the end of the 1930s, although more and more unions had been established in Hollywood, studio executives still maintained an inordinate amount of power.

Class in the Classical Hollywood Cinema

The Depression impacted upon the representation of class issues within **classical Hollywood cinema** in myriad ways. The usual Hollywood film had been (and still is) known for its sumptuous and glossy production values, subtly yet insistently displaying the appeal of material wealth. Classical Hollywood characters frequently wore glamorous clothes, slept in lavish bedrooms, ate at swanky restaurants, and lived in beautiful mansions. For example, the classical Hollywood melodramas of Greta Garbo or the musicals of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers almost always center on wealthy people enjoying privileged lives. Those types of movies thus presented beautiful worlds free of economic strife that filmgoers could enter and dream about for the price of a ticket. While those types of lush, escapist films remained popular throughout the Great Depression, some moviegoers began to distrust their cheery optimism and rich glamor. In response, the studios significantly revamped the types of films that they made during the early 1930s. For the first time since the early nickelodeon days, mainstream American pictures increasingly questioned the viability of capitalism. Some films began to deal with the nation's economic crisis in more realistic terms – Warner Brothers' Depression-era musicals almost always focus on out-of-work theater people. Some of the popular comedians of this period also did not embody the American Dream. Instead, stars like the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and Mae West used their anarchic wit in a declaration of comedic war on upper-class pretensions.

Hollywood films of the early 1930s sometimes turned the Horatio Alger myth on its head. *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) followed Depression-era youths as they looked for work, but instead of success, they find dashed hopes, poverty, crime, rape, and an accidental amputation. Heroines no longer got ahead by being good girls and marrying a rich husband; now, in films such as *Red Headed Woman* (1932) and *Baby Face* (1933), they sold their bodies to the highest bidder, using their wiles to “trade up” from a mailroom clerk to the head of the company. Heroes still showed dogged determination to succeed, but some had given up trying to find success through legitimate means and were now going outside the law to do so. **Gangster films** such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) proliferated during this period. Still other films implied a critique of the capitalist system, depicting everyday people struggling against establishment institutions like the government and big business. Even though most of these films eventually punished those who transgressed middle-class morality or civil law, audience sympathy by and large went to those characters who were fighting against the system. Furthermore, the downfall of such larger-than-life figures as those portrayed by James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Barbara Stanwyck pointed out that even these extraordinarily charismatic and driven individuals could not succeed in Depression-era America, whether playing by the rules or not.

Such pessimism and critique did not last long. The enforcement of the Hollywood **Production Code** in 1934, after sustained complaints from civil and

religious groups, reinstated middle-class morality and more optimistic stories. President Roosevelt, who had been elected in 1932, also worked tirelessly to promote a sense of the system working *for* the common man and not against him. As a means to solve the economic catastrophe, Roosevelt's administration tempered American capitalism with various socialist ideas such as welfare, work programs, farm subsidies, and social security. Roosevelt's so-called "New Deal" quickly shifted the mood of the country into supporting the establishment instead of resisting it. This restoration of faith in American institutions brought to an end much of the pessimism and class antagonism of pre-Code Hollywood, and ushered in a new generation of films that upheld a belief in the United States as a land of opportunity. Warner Brothers, for example, tied its new films directly to the optimism of the Roosevelt administration, calling them a "New Deal in Entertainment!" Gangster films and **social problem films** about the Depression subsided, and a new form of comedy emerged during the second half of the decade. These **screwball comedies**, as they were termed, often told stories of the wealthy and the poor coming together and finding common ground (usually symbolized by a rambunctious romance). Social class struggle was thus reworked into a story about a working-class woman meeting her wealthy boyfriend's family (as in *Easy Living* [1937]), or about the attraction between an heiress and a butler (as in *My Man Godfrey* [1936]). The **happy endings** of most screwball comedies, wherein the couple stops sparring and realizes their romantic compatibility, suggest that antagonisms between classes (as represented by each half of the couple) can also be resolved.

Arguably the most influential purveyor of the American Dream in the 1930s was director **Frank Capra**, a man who rose to fame directing screwball comedies. He won three Oscars during this period, and made some of the biggest box office successes of the decade. Capra himself had lived the Horatio Alger myth, beginning life in a lower-class environment before becoming one of the most successful and powerful men in Hollywood. Films like *Lady for a Day* (1933), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1935), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941) repackaged the American Dream for Depression-era audiences. Drawing on the traditions of Populism, Capra's films often featured rural or small-town fellows who stand up to ominous odds and somehow triumph, thus proving that "the American way" does indeed work. What made these films different from Hollywood's previous Horatio Alger success stories was that Capra made the obstacles facing the hero much more dire and menacing. Capra knew that a bright happy ending would be all the more powerful if the darkness before the dawn was pitch black: thus his protagonists often lack confidence in themselves (and the American Dream) before they ultimately succeed in the final reel. In Capra's classic Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), George Bailey (played by James Stewart) is so despondent over his failed economic situation that he is about to commit suicide.

The villains in Capra's films are usually corrupt power brokers – bankers, businessmen, politicians, etc. In this way, his films lightly critique but still affirm **hegemonic** capitalism. Rather than suggesting that big business itself is to blame



The romance between Clark Gable's newspaper reporter and Claudette Colbert's heiress in the screwball comedy *It Happened One Night* (1934) suggested that all social classes could come together, a message that Depression-era audiences apparently wanted to hear.

It Happened One Night, copyright © 1934, Columbia

for working-class hardships, these films instead show such problems to be caused by aberrantly villainous wealthy individuals. In Capra's films (and in Hollywood films in general), it is an individual man who is wrong, not the system itself. The **hegemonic negotiation** of capitalism in *It's a Wonderful Life* works in this manner: wealthy businessman Mr Potter (Lionel Barrymore) is presented as selfish, greedy, and evil, and that is why he is the villain. The fact that capitalism itself might cause or allow selfish, greedy, and evil things to happen is hinted at but never explicitly stated. In fact, the hero, George Bailey, is also a capitalist entrepreneur, but a "good" one, running a savings-and-loan business for his friends and neighbors. The evil millionaires that are sometimes portrayed in American films are thus not presented as endemic to the institution of capitalism. Furthermore, those wicked power brokers are sometimes depicted as foreigners (thus not how a wealthy American would act), living in another historical era (thus not a problem in *today's* economy), or simply one bad apple that needs to be taken out of a system that is working just

fine. Occasionally a Hollywood movie will sound the idea that wealth corrupts, or that “money cannot buy happiness.” Those “moral” lessons – just as surely as those implied by the Horatio Alger myth – also praise the superiority of middle-class people and values.

Case Study: *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

While Hollywood films by the mid-1930s had begun reasserting the power of the American Dream, other art forms maintained a more critical stance toward the country’s economic problems. Theater, for example, with plays such as *Street Scene*, *Dead End*, *Golden Boy*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, and *Pins and Needles*, raised issues about capitalism and class struggle that American films feared to acknowledge. Some of the more popular Depression-era plays were adapted into films in the latter half of the 1930s, but this usually required extensive revision to soften their criticism of big business, the law, and capitalism itself. Such was also the case with John Steinbeck’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book tells the story of a typical Midwestern family forced to leave their farm due to a great drought that has turned the land into a giant dust bowl. Steinbeck did not scrimp on his depiction of the desperation, violence, and despair these itinerants faced in their search for work and a new home. The novel was adapted into a film by 20th Century-Fox in 1940. The year of production is important because, by the time the film came out, the country was significantly on the economic upswing and the socio-economic problems of the Joad family could be regarded as historical and not contemporary.



Members of the cast of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), one of the few American films of the era that attempted to dramatize the harsh economic realities of the Great Depression.

The Grapes of Wrath, copyright © 1940, 20th Century-Fox

Steinbeck had used the journey of the Joads to express leftist, socialist sympathies, critiquing the way the capitalist system beat down hapless workers. In particular, he narrated the growing class consciousness of young Tom Joad as he witnesses the exploitation of his family and others by big agricultural companies and the banks. However, such a forthright attack on corporate institutions could not be made in Hollywood, particularly with Chase Manhattan Bank as the major stockholder of 20th Century-Fox. (Steinbeck was incensed to learn of this connection after he had already sold the novel to the studio.) Darryl F. Zanuck, the head of the studio, worked closely with scriptwriter Nunnally Johnson and director John Ford to keep the film as hard-hitting as possible – without actually hitting any precise targets. Throughout the film, the question of who is to blame for the suffering and degradation that the Joads face is left purposefully vague. An ill-defined “they” is responsible for spreading around thousands of handbills advertising only 800 jobs in California. “They” are also the ones who come to burn out a transient camp of migrant workers. And just when it seems that the film is indicting the police for collaborating with evil employers, a character points out that those men are just hired security men with tin badges, and not official agents of the law. When Tom Joad (played by Henry Fonda) asks a man who drove all the people off the farms, the answer given is the dust storms – not banking or corporate interests.

Where the film does remain tough and unblinking is in its depiction of the Joads’ struggle. Shot in a stark and realist style of cinematography, the images of the deserted farms and the transient camps approach the look of famous Depression-era news photographs. The framing and visual design also provide silent commentary on the suffering: as one family watches a bulldozer plow down their homestead, the camera travels down to the ground to show the tire treads running over the shadows of the family. In a possible sly allusion to the comment that it is just “dust” that has caused these people’s suffering, the film consistently shows the stylish cars of the bankers and bosses driving away and kicking up dust on the dispossessed workers.

The film also includes some of the socialist rhetoric of Steinbeck’s novel, most famously in Tom’s final speech wherein he suggests that “a fellow ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a bigger soul.” Yet the film redirects these sentiments into a discussion of family – a much more palatable topic for Hollywood and America than socialism. Thus, rather than being a story about young Tom’s ideological awakening, the film becomes the story of a family struggling to stay together during hard times. In this way, Ma Joad (played by Jane Darwell in an Oscar-winning performance) becomes central to the picture. Throughout, she consistently talks about holding the family together, emphasizing that as the key point of the story. In depicting the hardships of the Joads and other wayfarers, the picture repeatedly focuses on families, with particular emphasis on hungry children. In this way, when Tom talks about being part of “a bigger soul” or when Ma concludes the film declaring that “we are the people,” such talk is tied to

notions of family bonding and not socialism. In the most direct attempt to create distance between the film's outlook and socialism, Tom actually asks a man "What is these 'reds'" he hears people talk about. The man replies, "I ain't talkin' about that one way or the other" and quickly changes the subject.

Also, the film only uses a section of the entire novel, and reorders some events and actions to create a more optimistic ending. In the book, the Joads stop at a friendly, clean camp run by the Department of Agriculture. Steinbeck's novel follows this moment of charitable help and rest with the Joads being hired as scabs for a disreputable peach farm and being treated almost like inmates. The film switches these events so that things seem to be getting better for the family by the end of the picture. To emphasize this, once the Joads enter the government camp, the film is brightly and evenly lit, and the soundtrack is filled with birds chirping and children laughing, instead of dogs braying and winds howling. This sequence thus represents the federal government as kind-hearted and not as part of the problem. The script also takes Ma's declaration of eventual triumph from another part of the novel to end the film on a more positive note. Nonetheless, while Hollywood inevitably tinkered with the ideas presented in Steinbeck's novel, the film still emerged as a stark and sympathetic portrayal of rural working-class families. The mere mention of "reds" in a Hollywood film that does not immediately and concisely demonize them is in itself a remarkable achievement. Although Steinbeck worried about what would happen to his novel when it was "Hollywood-ized," he went on to announce his approval of the final picture. *The Grapes of Wrath* is today considered to be one of the best classical Hollywood representations of Depression-era life and issues.

Conclusion: Recloaking Class Consciousness

The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of the worst economic crises in US history, and it presented a large challenge to the dominance of American capitalism, both as an economic system and as a set of ideological assumptions and beliefs. The Great Depression affected not only how class issues were depicted in American film, but also how the industry made films, as various unions struggled to wrest some control away from studio moguls. However, by the end of the 1930s, the major Hollywood studios still retained their economic power base, and the pleasures and advantages of capitalism were for the most part once again being championed by Hollywood films. While the Depression had made many people painfully aware of class stratification, and made others question the viability of capitalism, American film's hegemonic negotiation of class issues kept the core values of capitalism firmly in place.

QUESTIONS FOR
DISCUSSION

- 1 What do you consider your own class standing to be? Do you see class represented in Hollywood movies in ways that match accurately your own experience of class?
- 2 The Horatio Alger myth was and is an important aspect of America's self-image as a capitalist democracy. In what ways does classical Hollywood narrative form "speak" the Horatio Alger myth? Can you give examples of the myth in other films you may have seen? Can you think of current stars whose lives seem to embody the myth?
- 3 The gangster film is in many ways about what one can and cannot do in America to succeed monetarily. When you watch a gangster film, who do you "root" for – the gangsters or the police? What are the implications of those identifications?

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- Intolerance* (1916)
- The Gold Rush* (1925)
- Scarface* (1932)
- Wild Boys of the Road* (1933)
- Modern Times* (1936)
- Easy Living* (1937)
- Stella Dallas* (1937)
- Meet John Doe* (1941)
- It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)