SOCIAL EYES
Issue 3, Winter 2012
SocialEyes, Issue 3

Table of Contents

Editor’s Introduction...................................................................................................................... page 3.

Violence in America

by Kevin Wickersham ..................................................................................................................... page 5.

The Myth of Mask-Ulnity

by Genevieve DiSpirito ..................................................................................................................... page 17.

Torture

by Kimberly Seymour ..................................................................................................................... page 25.

AIDS and Capitalism

by Philip Cushing .......................................................................................................................... page 41.

SocialEyes Staff

Henisha Patel ’12 Editor in Chief
Brianna Fitz ’13 Submissions Coordinator
Janelle Louis ’13 Marketing Coordinator
Roya Bagheri ’13 Editor
Genevieve DiSpirito ’13 Editor
Phillip McHarris ’14 Editor
Amber Nakpil ’14 Editor
Rebecca Redmon ’12 Editor
Phillip Cushing ’12 Editor
Betsy Leonar-Wright Faculty Advisor
Michael Malec Faculty Advisor
Deborah Piatelli Faculty Advisor

Cover Illustration by Rebecca Redmon ’12

Learn more about SocialEyes at http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/cas/sociology/socialeyes.html
Editor’s Introduction

We are proud to present Issue 3 of SocialEyes, Boston College’s undergraduate sociological research journal. The purpose of this journal is to make sociology and its related fields accessible and relevant to the Boston College student body, and these pieces exemplify that mission. Truly a collaborative effort, this publication features original work by students from a range of disciplines in an effort to illustrate the pervasiveness of Sociology in several academic fields as well as in students’ lives outside the classroom.

Boston College has always been a university geared towards social action and hands-on learning. From its Jesuit Catholic foundation and multiple opportunities for service learning and volunteerism, this university is in its essence an institute of activism with goals of solving important global and local problems. SocialEyes aims to be a part of this legacy, and seeks to exhibit to the Boston College community and beyond that the tools for social solutions and change are in our hands, and that we all play a role in our societies.

The SocialEyes staff and I would like to express our immense gratitude for the hard work of all the authors presented in this publication. We are all incredibly thankful for their dedication and proud to publish their work. Additionally, this issue and progress towards our bigger goals would not be possible without the incredible support of our affiliated faculty. We had the pleasure of welcoming Betsy Leondar-Wright onto the SocialEyes team as our new faculty adviser, and hope to have her positive insight and enthusiasm on board for many more issues to come. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Professors Deb Piatelli and Michael Malec, whose guidance and patience have been essential to the success of SocialEyes and to the Sociology department. We are truly thankful to be able to work with all three of these amazing people and look forward to having them on board in the future. Finally, a special thanks goes out to last year’s seniors, David Watsula, Emily Parzybok, Kirsten Abate, and Lena Park, who worked tirelessly on this issue but graduated before its publication.

We hope you enjoy Issue 3 of SocialEyes!

Sincerely,

Henisha Patel

Editor-in-Chief
Violence in America: Rooted in Fear

By Kevin Wickersham

Kevin is a member of the class of 2013 majoring in Psychology and Sociology with the intention of one day receiving a Masters’ Degree in Emergency Management and becoming either a firefighter or paramedic. Outside the classroom, Kevin is an EMT and serves as the Vice President of Boston College’s Eagle EMS program. He started this piece as a school assignment but continued pursuing the subject as a matter of personal interest, guided by Professors Taniguchi and Derber. Kevin would like to thank his girlfriend Brianna for her helping this piece reach its full potential.

Introduction

In the film Bowling for Columbine, documentarian Michael Moore examines the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 from a sociological perspective in an attempt to discern the root causes of this violence and other violent incidents in America. Rather than concentrating on the individual psychology of each of the perpetrators as the popular media has, Moore deciphers the social influences that drive gun violence in America as a whole. He explores different factors in American culture and eventually concludes that a culture of fear exists in America and is the main factor driving violence.

The media has a vested interest in keeping people afraid and creates universal fear to motivate unquestioning consumerism of media and other products. American foreign policy is not the main factor in accounting for the prevalence of gun violence in America, despite what many people believe. War and conflict are present throughout the world and many European nations are involved in the same war efforts that occupy the US. Despite this, America has by far the most gun-related deaths per year, though its inhabitants watch as many violent movies, play as many hours of violent video games, and have as much poverty and divorce as many nations throughout the world. With the aforementioned variables constant, what is the difference between Americans, and the Canadians and British that causes America to be so
much more violent? The current culture of fear primarily driven by popular news media is the main reason that America has the highest rates of gun violence of any industrialized country in the world.

**The Massacre at Columbine High School**

The massacre at Columbine is a prominent and radical manifestation of the culture of violence and fear in America, and the sensationalism of this event in the media further increased the level of fear, boosting sales of security apparatus for schools, further satisfying the desires of the capitalist engine that promulgates the culture of fear. The Columbine High School massacre of April 1999 occurred in the small town of Littleton, CO, when students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed twelve students, one teacher, and then themselves. Twenty-four students were directly injured in the process. They were armed with illegally obtained and modified firearms and improvised explosive devices. Klebold and Harris were members of a cult-like group known as the Trenchcoat Mafia, and were generally considered dark outcasts from the culture of the school. Members of this group were alienated from their classmates, and wore black trenchcoats as a symbol of conformity and acceptance within their group, as a coping mechanism for their alienation.

These individuals listened to heavy metal music, and this genre of music was immediately blamed for influencing the outburst of violence in Littleton. The fact that Eric and Dylan were outcasts from their high school community prompted feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and depression. They lost perspective on life and were unable to see beyond their high school years and look on to the future. They were victims of fatalistic short-termism and were fearful that the rest of their lives would consist of the same rejection that they experienced in high school. The massacre at Columbine is the ultimate cry for attention and ultimately an
escape for these forgotten youth. It cannot be simply explained through heavy metal music, violent video games, morbid movies, or individual psychology. The Columbine massacre and other incidents like it including the Virginia Tech killings of 2007, where a socially alienated and disturbed man became a lone gunman and killed thirty-two people before committing suicide, are signs of greater issues within our society, particularly the culture of fear in America. In exploring these anomalous incidents, it is important to consider the environment and setting.

Many politicians and media outlets blamed the Columbine shooting on the fact that the killers listened to angry heavy metal music, and the fault fell squarely on Marilyn Manson, a heavy metal musician who projects a powerful and terrifying image and whose music contains disturbing and controversial themes. Following the Columbine massacre the media claimed that this type of music promotes violence and hatred and offered this as an explanation as to why the massacre occurred. One might not expect this, but in the interview he provided for Bowling for Columbine, Manson delivered the best possible answer to why the young men of Columbine High School would be driven to kill classmates and teachers. According to Manson, “the media wants to keep people afraid so that they will consume,” and “[he] was the perfect scapegoat. It was easy to put [his] face on the screen and blame it on [him]” (Moore). He also mentions that the media wants to undermine the themes of his music which, as he states, encourage people to not be afraid to say what they want to say, and to challenge established institutions and social structures that listeners find to be unfair. Interestingly enough, Manson was exactly right. The news media provides skewed and disproportionate images of violence that inspire fear and distrust in the American population, for economic gain. As mentioned in the film regarding news media, “if it bleeds, it leads” (Moore).
Military Industrial Complex

Littleton, CO is home to several other landmark facilities aside from Columbine High School. Lockheed-Martin Corporation, one of the world’s largest producers of military aircraft and weapons, has a major industrial presence in Littleton and employs roughly 5,000 workers in their factory there producing missiles, fighter jets, and other military apparatus (Moore). Due to the proximity of this major manifestation of the American Military Industrial Complex (MIC), companies that manufacture goods for the military including arms and ammunition, vehicles and planes, armor and bombs, etc. for the US and other governments, the major economy of Littleton is motivated by war. Therefore, many inhabitants of this community are accustomed to thinking in terms of military effort. When wars are raging throughout the world, jobs are safe in Littleton and the community prospers, as is the case in many major population centers in America. A manager of the Lockheed plant states, “Littleton is representative of the rest of the world” (Moore). As unfortunate as this may be, it is true; much of the US and world economy is targeted toward military production and revenue is lost in times of peace. As a result, the American government and others proactively pursue military conflict as a way to increase economic production and improve the profit margins for the companies that make up the MIC. Producing armaments and ammunition, and working for the nation’s military dominance in the world, war and violence are prominent in the collective mind of the local community of Littleton and the national and world communities.

This mindset is not unique to Littleton, but is representative of the mindset of the rest of the nation. Americans have become accustomed to the use of violence, a result of continuous military efforts and war raging throughout the world, which is a product of America pursuing its economic interests abroad to satisfy the wants of the MIC. When examined, it is obvious how the political and economic spheres of power in our country revolve around war. Adhering
to the previous example, Lockheed-Martin, like most (if not all) armament manufacturers in America has a political action committee (PAC) that lobbies in support of pro-military legislation and provides economic support for political candidates that advocate for pro-war policies that will benefit the profit margin of Lockheed-Martin (Political Disclosures, LMC). In 2009 alone, Lockheed made nearly $14 million in donations to support pro-military candidates for the US Senate and House of Representatives. As a result of its efforts, Lockheed was the contractor that received the greatest value in government contracts amounting to $38.4 billion in the year 2009, during a time of the most severe economic recession since the Great Depression (LMC Fourth Quarter Report 2009, 16).

The Military Industrial Complex is obviously immensely powerful in impacting political moves made by the government, but also is one of the primary forces in the use of media to determine US public opinion on matters of war. The proclaimed threat of terrorism, for example, drove Americans to support practical abolishment of constitutional rights (The Patriot Act of 2001) and “preemptive” attack on Iraq, a country that is not involved with terrorism against the US and has never posed a threat to American security. Could it be possible that the US sponsored an invasion of a country and were simply wrong about the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)? With immense intelligence resources including spies and satellites all over the world, there is no way that America would attack Iraq unless it was absolutely sure that it possessed WMDs, if that was the true objective. In fact, there have not been any WMDs in Iraq in the last 10 years preceding the invasion, and the US government was aware of this (Richelson). The closest the American government has come to being honest about their reasons for invading Iraq is to say that they were “protecting oil and other American interests” (Hendren), those interests being the profit margins of America’s major oil corporations. These companies are some of the largest and most powerful in the
world, and have enormous economic pull over the decision makers in the government. The companies of the MIC, along with the American oil companies have the power to steer American foreign and domestic policy in the way that best suits their bottom line.

**Popular Media Propaganda**

None of this is a coincidence. If one looks further back into the history of America, other nearly identical examples of this type of abuse of power in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Indonesia, El Salvador, and countless other nations have occurred in the last century alone. American fear is the cause for all of these, for if Americans were a critical audience to the propaganda that is spoon-fed to them in the form of popular news media, public support for these actions would be so low that government execution of these actions would mean open revolution. Linguist Noam Chomsky describes how the American population is controlled and subdued through fear. He concentrates on the terror created by the power elite to sedate people who would otherwise rise up and challenge the established order, which the power elite have an interest in protecting. Chomsky states, “... And the population must huddle under the umbrella of power, in fear that its way of life and destiny are under imminent threat” (Tehelka). This depicts exactly how American media and politicians use fear to tranquilize any potential naysayer and keep viewers addicted, blindly consuming the “facts” supplied and living in fear, afraid to question authority or live a life independent of fear. In short, the MIC makes the most money and government gains the highest compliance when Americans are most afraid of a foreign threat, therefore these groups use every media tool available, particularly news, to influence the culture of fear in America for their own gain.

Though the culture of war and violence may not be the unique factor distinguishing America from other nations, the structure of media in America is certainly unique. Unlike
Britain and Canada, where the primary television news outlets are principally publicly funded (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and British Broadcasting Company (BBC)) all major American news outlets are privately funded, with the exception of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) (Powers). These are generally reliable and unbiased outlets, but their market share is extremely limited because they lack the funding to compete with the numerous and wealthy private news outlets. As a result, private media dominates in America and is able to promote whichever viewpoints best suit their interests. Therefore, unless news is coming from a public source, it must be viewed with suspicion.

Barry Glassner, a University of Southern California sociologist and author of the book *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Fear the Wrong Things* is interviewed in *Bowling for Columbine* and summarizes his research findings. In the film, Glassner reveals the disconcerting statistic that “between 1990 and 1998, murder rates decreased 20%, but the number of murder stories on network news increased 600%” (Moore). It is apparent that the media is seriously exaggerating the prevalence of violence, but for what purpose? In the introduction to Glassner’s book, he discusses many disjointed and anomalous incidents, such as school shootings, that are erroneously linked by news media and are pitched as alarming trends or epidemics. Glassner states, “Television news survives on scares.” Further, he indicates that, “Producers of TV news programs routinely let emotional accounts trump objective information” (Glassner xii). These abuses of information and sensationalism are what keep TV news alive. The viewership of the major news networks, kept addicted to the news through the culture of fear, is a captive audience that is possessed and held vulnerable to the advertisements embedded within the daily news propaganda. In this way, we can see that TV news media is overtly and directly corrupt and biased. Conglomerates will inculcate viewers
with the “news” in a propagandized manner that best suits their ulterior motives as the executives take huge bonuses and personal benefits after driving up their companies’ enormous profits. Note that this phenomenon exists completely independent from truth being provided to the viewers. The results from these fabrications are widespread fear and negative emotional stimulation that deeply perturbs American citizens while directly motivating consumerism and violence in our society. The only way to modify the culture of fear and violence is to rise up to challenge the established order of elite dominance over American society. Critical viewership of popular media is essential to affecting change in the culture of violence and fear in America.

**Violence Resulting from Fear**

It is a fact that a moderate number of murders and violent acts occur each year in America. These are disproportionally represented in the news media creating fear and a perception that no one is safe, and that our way of life is under constant and imminent threat on a daily basis from unknown forces. When citizens are unnecessarily afraid of being murdered, assaulted, raped, or kidnapped and weapons are easy to acquire, disaster is impending. Such fear predisposes individuals to indiscriminantly and random violence. As individuals are on constant alert for being affected by a terrorist attack, victimized by burglars, or harmed by any other rare and unpredictable incident, they mentally prepare to aggressively protect themselves. Having prepared for the worst, if individuals suffer minor confrontation, this can easily develop into major conflict. “Road rage” is a good example. These aggravations in traffic stem from minor, rather insignificant conflict or frustration, but sometimes result in violent assault and at worst, murder. As individuals become so extremely obsessed with protecting their personal safety, violence is the only outlet for this pent-up energy. Understanding all of this, we can easily link pervasive fear and instances of unnecessary and idiopathic violence.
A prime manifestation of violence resulting from fear is the existence of the Michigan state militia and other groups like it. These are informal organizations comprised of citizens that train and arm themselves in order to protect their area from internal or external threats, a response to the culture of fear that is instilled by the media. Many communities in America have these so-called “citizens’ militias,” made up of volunteer citizens that form a primarily defensive force. In American history, militias were the main military force; during the Revolutionary War and early parts of the Civil War, the fighting was entirely militia based. Currently, the only forms of recognized militia are the state and federal National Guard and the Naval Militia (Kania 3). Other groups, like the Michigan state militia are unrecognized groups protected under the constitutional right to bear arms. Recently, these groups have come under fire for fostering anti-government sentiment, trading in banned arms and explosives, and planning attacks on elements of the government that they believe to be threatening or conspiring against them (Kania 2).

This paranoia is an extreme manifestation of what is occurring in every corner of America. News media teaches Americans to believe that their way of life is constantly being threatened. A Michigan militia member, when asked why they behave in this way, stated, “being armed is an American responsibility. If you’re not armed and can’t protect yourself, you are in dereliction of duty [as an American]” (Moore). The militiamen later stated that they perceive a constant threat of violence against their families and community from deviant individuals in society, the government, and international invaders. They also claim that they cannot trust anyone but themselves to provide protection, exemplified by their express distrust of the government to protect their families. The example of the Michigan militiamen is a drastic display of the culture of fear in America. This fear is propagated through mainstream American media and is by no means accidental; it is a method of control for profit-driven
corporations that capitalize on the population’s fear of harm. When people are afraid to leave their homes for fear of being robbed or murdered, they lose perspective on the world and their fear drives them to further consume the media and products that increase their sense of security. This is a motive for the news and other media industries as it improves ratings and boosts sales of their product.

Understanding the roots of violence in American society is of the utmost importance. This exposition barely scratches the surface of corruption and propaganda that is used against American citizens to create support for unjust wars and culture of consumerism. The Power Elites in our nation use nearly limitless resources to hoodwink Americans into consuming their manifesto of moral superiority while the US government raids and ravages small, powerless, and harmless countries for economic gain of our major corporations, under the guise of fighting Communism, hunting terrorists, or liberating subjugated peoples. As made clear earlier, these corporations feed off of US military hegemony, and in turn feed right back into further domination of “untapped markets” and extension of US hegemonic power.

All of this occurs as Americans silently and blindly consume thinly veiled propaganda on nearly all major media outlets. Discussion of the real trends of violence (not those circulated by the media) shows us that we are directly and deliberately being lied to by corrupt politicians and major corporations. Americans are living in fear, and as a result will fall for any threat fabricated by the government and the media for their own profit. If you desire to change the established American order of trickery, lies, destruction, theft, and most of all, fear, you must understand how you are being fooled as a pawn in this corporate economic chess game that is American politics.
Works Cited


The Myth of “Mask”-ulinity

By Genevieve DiSpirito

Genevieve is a member of the Class of 2013. She is an English and Sociology double major with a minor in Hispanic Studies. Her interest in contemporary gender constructs compelled Genevieve to explore what it means to be masculine in today's terms and was the inspiration for this article. Her other interests include yoga, poetry, and Philly cheese steaks. Genevieve would like to thank Professor Abigail Brooks who has been a constant inspiration to her.

As sociologist Michael S. Kimmel so adeptly recognizes, “We think of manhood as eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man” (1994, 119). Masculinity is assumed to be embedded, innate. It is an objective, universal standard with little tolerance for nonconformity to which all men in America are held. Masculinity is rigid, unchanging, unforgiving—but not as a biological reality as men think—as an ideal. The manifestation of this masculinity in the human male is not uniform and inalterable but fluid and subjective. The true evidence of this subjectivity is the inability of any man to perfectly personify these standards. Masculinity is not biological, but rather, this impossible standard of masculinity is collectively contrived by the very males that it ravages. John Stoltenberg claims, “The notion of manhood is a cultural delusion” (1989, 28). To say this contrived masculinity is innate is to call all men defective. To believe this idealized masculinity is the male actuality is to set men up for failure, exacerbating all the feelings of insecurity and inadequacy from which such an oppressive standard stems. To put it simply, if masculinity is innate to the male biology, why then do men feel so extraordinarily compelled to constantly act out the terms of masculinity, to prove themselves as wholly masculine? Masculinity’s only place in reality is its residence in the very real collective male imagination that breathes life into it every day.
In order to best understand masculinity as it is culturally contrived and naturalized, one must investigate it in terms of its relationship with femininity. The female has a very dynamic role in the construction, manifestation, and maintenance of masculinity today. “Masculinity” is the act of deliberately rejecting the “feminine;” all that the female represents must be wholly opposed. Stoltenberg reveals, “This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is [emphasis added]” (1989, 126). Women are stereotypically assumed to be expressive and emotional, docile and demure; subsequently, masculinity is rooted in stoicism and emotional numbness. Phil Petrie asserts, “‘Being a man’ is synonymous with being emotionless” (1982, 231). Revealing inner emotions would expose a man, present him as vulnerable: “To be exposed as ‘soft’ at the core is one of the worst things a man can suffer in this culture” (Bordo 1999, 55). Instead, he must be stoic, composed at all times—more inanimate than human, indeed. The unforgiving construction of masculinity as the negation of femininity has detrimental consequences for men and women alike.

Interestingly, there are some exceptions to the mandated emotional numbness of masculinity. Anger and all its violent manifestations are acceptable in the universal “code” of masculinity. Violence and aggression serve restorative purposes when a man’s masculinity is belittled or questioned. They also serve as a way to uphold this very specific masculine standard. A means of “gender policing,” violence can be used to threaten and abuse those whose masculinity is questionable. Violence is evident in high school bullying and college fraternity hazing to challenge masculinity and punish those who do not rise to the standard (Kimmel 2008). As Lillian Rubin explains, “He can act out anger and frustration [often in the form of violence] [...] But ask him to express his sadness, his fear, his dependency—all those feelings that would expose his vulnerability to himself or to another—and he’s likely to close...
down” (1984, 82). Thus, emotional stoicism, with the exception of anger, is constantly emphasized. Men must be un-feeling, hard.

Hardness and lack of feeling as fundamental principals of manhood expand beyond a man’s emotional persona into his physical and sexual identities as well, resulting in an “anti-feminine” sexual expression that ultimately oppresses women. Susan Bordo presents this idea in a startling but truthful manner: “We live in a culture that encourages men to think of themselves as their penises [...]” (1999, 37). However, the penis that society has in mind is not the soft, responsive, feeling organ that it is, but the hard, machine-like tool that society demands it to be. Consequently, men must be “hard” emotionally and possess equally hard physiques. Soft bodies are regressive and “unacceptably feminine;” instead, the body must resemble “proud, erect phalluses” (Bordo 2008, 49). In addition to men’s hard emotional and muscular states, men, of course, must be hard in bed. All men are expected to “perform” flawlessly, like an automated power tool. The current Viagra phenomenon substantiates this expectation. Men flood their penises with chemicals to compensate for the lack of blood flow, enabling them to “go all night,” etc. Hailing the penis as the sole focal point strips sex of being the intimate, sensual act it inherently is. Performance eclipses pleasure, specifically her pleasure. The fixation on the hard, unyielding penis as the “masculine” version of sex completely neglects the woman’s end of the sexual act (Bordo 2008). Thus, the sex act is no longer mutual. It is merely a penal performance and woman is simply the fleshy stage. To experience sex in this way is to abandon the primal reasons sex is: to connect, to realize pleasure, to feel.

Men are still performing sex to feel and to connect, but not always to feel emotions or to connect with women; instead, they have sex to feel “masculine” and connect with other men. Sex becomes a means of communicating status and validating a man’s position in the realm of
masculinity. Women are pawns of men’s sexual strategy: to gain status among other men, proving masculinity through sexual competence, as they seek out “hot” women. Sexual activity becomes a means of communication—not between the man and woman involved in the act—but the man and the rest of the male world whose approval he desires. Kimmel sums it up succinctly: “The pursuit of [sexual] conquests is more about guys proving something to other guys than it is about the women involved” (2008, 192). Thus, women are merely vehicles to a more distant ends. Women serve to prove a man’s “proper” masculine sexuality to other men through the “conquest” of desirable women and to himself through actualizing the phallocentrism that seems to dominate the social prescription of sexual acts.

Inevitably, there are a multitude of problems for men and women that arise from the belief in the validity of this singular version of masculinity. All men who do not manifest the aggression, violence, and a steadfast numbness to all other feelings, as well as the specific sexual identity that resultantly oppresses the female, (in other words, those who do not correctly exemplify the opposite of what is “feminine”) become marginalized. This makes for a very hostile environment for homosexual men, women, and virtually any man rendered “effeminate” for one reason or another. In fact, many men become socially ostracized in this way, for the masculine “ideal” is simply that: purely an ideal and not a reality. Few men can live up to this standard. Sadly, the deep-seated fear of being unable to measure up to this masculinity often becomes a demonstration of homophobia. Kimmel explains, “Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (1994, 131). This fear of one’s inability to fully embody masculinity results in the fear of other men who evidence this inability. To fear them is to exclude them, to dissociate from them and make evident one’s dissimilarity from them. This exclusion plagues not just homosexuals though, but any man falling short of the oppressive
standard of masculinity. “Anyone could be a ‘faggot’” (Avicolli 2009, 144). The label “faggot” claims anyone and everyone not masculine enough, hence too feminine. “Faggots” are marginalized and ostracized, defective representations of what a man “should” be.

Assuredly, woman becomes the recipient of equal and greater denigration and scorn, for she is the perfect, holistic expression of what man should strive against, should never be. As previously mentioned, her person and respective characteristics delineate what a man should always reject. Thus, she gives meaning to what is “masculinity.” Her being outlines its very definition. But she is also necessary for the maintenance and manifestation of this masculinity she has inadvertently been exploited to create. She is utilized as a means for man to realize the specific phallocentric sexual identity imposed on him. She is the stage on which man enacts the phallocentric sex that masculinity requires, all the while disposing of his need for pleasure, her right to pleasure, and even her existence as the reciprocal sexual participant. Sex becomes merely a means to exert a phallocentric domination. Furthermore, the “achievement” of having had sex with a desirable woman elevates a man’s status among other men, exploiting the sex act to prove his masculinity to them (as he has already proven to himself by fulfilling phallocentric sex). In this way, woman is crucial to what is known as “masculinity;” she inadvertently defines it and unwillingly legitimates it, while simultaneously is oppressed by it.

Masculinity as primarily rooted in the negation of the feminine (an equally nebulous social construction), as opposed to any kind of positive affirmation, results in a masculine identity that is fragile and illusory. Its boundaries are not precisely delineated; what is thought to be “rigid” today may actually be wavering tomorrow. The presumed power brought on by exemplifying the perfect masculinity is never realized. The insecurities and feelings of inadequacy that prompt this unending masculine pursuit are never placated. The quest to be “masculine” is unending. Man has held himself up to a standard he will never reach. He will
always fail. But he cannot settle for failure, so he continues oppressing himself at his own hand. In the process, he suffers latent consequences in addition to the grand realization of his inability and resultant feelings of frustration, insecurity, and inadequacy.

Perfectly conforming to today’s standards of masculinity yields a shell of a man, devoid of emotionality; a male sexuality that is equally ridded of its emotionality, pleasure, and profundity, and finally a woman, scorned and used. Above all, men still do not feel masculine. In fact, they feel as desperate as ever. With feminism gaining headway, a shifting economy that stifles the likelihood of achieving male “breadwinner” status, relentless media portrayals of buff, unfeeling “manly” men, and the total absence of any sort of cultural “marker” of masculinity (like marriage and breadwinning in more antiquated times), men could not feel farther from masculinity (Kimmel 2008). Instead they feel defective, inadequate.

The surest way to cease the oppression brought on by the impossible “task” of attaining this singular definition of masculinity is to embrace the reality that “the variety of human sexedness is infinite” (Stoltenberg 1989, 28). It is certainly impossible that all men can seamlessly fit into the discrete category of masculinity as it is prescribed today. Most—if not all—cannot. But these “inabilities” to perfectly manifest The American Masculinity are not defects at all but evidence of the myth that this masculinity is, the mask that this masculinity is, suffocating the rich plurality of human masculinities beneath it.
Works Cited


Petrie, Phil W. 1982. “Real Men Don’t Cry...And Other ‘Uncool’ Myths.” Essence.


Constructing a Torture-Sustaining Society 2,000 Years Later: Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ and the Abu Ghraib Abuse Scandal

By Kimberly Seymour

Kimberly is a member of the class of 2011 and pursued the study of ethics and social justice through her International Studies major and Hispanic Studies minor. As a graduate of Boston College’s Global Proficiency program, she supplemented her multicultural studies with abroad experiences in Barcelona, Rome, and Santiago, Chile. This paper was originally submitted as a final assignment for Jared Del Rosso’s Theorizing Torture course and was inspired by her abroad study in Santiago where she focused on Augusto Pinochet’s violent persecution of the Chilean people. Kimberly extends her sincere thanks to Jared for his encouragement and thought-provoking lectures that have inspired her passion for the study of ethics. She would also like to thank Professor Roberto Goizueta for motivating her exploration of social justice issues through the lens of her Catholic faith.

On February 25, 2004, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ was released to eager moviegoers in the United States. His vividly unsettling and violent depiction of the final hours of the life of Jesus Christ was deemed controversial by critics, yet the film garnered noteworthy success, ranking twelfth in the all-time domestic earning. Within two months of the film’s debut, American society was bombarded with another equally shocking and disturbing release as photos detailing the humiliating, sadistic torture and abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison by United States military police personnel surfaced in the media. A former site of detention and mass executions of Saddam Hussein’s political prisoners, Abu Ghraib prison was occupied by US military forces as a detention facility during the Iraq Invasion from 2003 to 2006 (Pike 2006). Both Gibson’s film and the leaked Abu Ghraib photos bear striking resemblances in their respective depictions of both physical and psychological aspects of torture. Visual evidence of deliberate humiliation, stress positions, and corporal abuse effectively communicate the anguish of the victims in both instances. However, an arguably more distressing comparison that arises when assessing these instances of torture is the evidence of societal circumstances that permitted and tolerated such inhuman behavior. In
assessing the construction of what Richard Jackson (2007) defines as a “torture-sustaining reality,” one finds that, unfortunately, not much has changed in the way in which societies, implicitly or explicitly, justify the use of torture since the conviction and crucifixion of Jesus Christ some two thousand years ago.

**Communicating Pain through Image**

Elaine Scarry’s (1985) detailed investigation on the communication of pain asserts that language is wholly ineffective and nearly irrelevant as a means of expressing pain to a second party. However, from the well-known axiom that states, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” it is evident that the visual evidence of anguish serves as a much more effective medium for transmitting such accounts of suffering. Both the two-hour footage from *The Passion of the Christ* and the numerous photos detailing abuse from Abu Ghraib prison caught the attention of American and global societies as a result of their shocking and outrageous nature. The strikingly coincidental premier of Gibson’s film a mere two months before the media release of the photos from Abu Ghraib facilitates the comparison of the two depictions. Audiences recovering from the uncensored and astonishing cruelty of *The Passion* were suddenly bombarded by the contemporary images of detention atrocities. The infamous image of the “Hooded Man” itself embodies the three most distinct moments traditionally illustrated by the Passion narrative: the mocking of Christ, often shown blindfolded to conceal the identity of his torturers; Ecce Homo, Christ standing on a pedestal for his mock coronation; and Man of Sorrows, the limp, dead body of Christ with arms outstretched at four and eight o’clock (Mitchell 2005).
It is not surprising, then, that the image of the Iraqi detainee standing on a pedestal, blindfolded, with his arms extended near his sides conjured up the strikingly corresponding scenes from Gibson’s *The Passion*, “[The Hooded Man] is the Christ being given over by Pilate to his crucifiers, extending his arms downward, his open palms toward the crowd in the expression of his inconceivable willingness to take on their sins” (David 2004).

Film audiences and critics were profoundly disturbed by director Mel Gibson’s graphic and gory depictions of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus, some even calling the violent scenes pornographic and sadomachistic (Caton 2008). However, the raw, physical pain imposed upon the Abu Ghraib detainees is portrayed less explicitly. Whereas the scourging ripped Jesus’ flesh from the bone, the crown of thorns pierced his temples, and the nails
penetrated his hands and feet to affix his contorted body to the cross, such gruesome portrayals of pain are much less overt in the collection of photos that surfaced from the U.S. prison in Iraq. Rather than leave physical evidence of abuse upon the bodies of tortured detainees, American military personnel resorted to what Darius Rejali (2007) defines as “clean” techniques. Distinct from psychological torture, which does not leave obvious, tangible evidence of its use, clean torture consists of physical abuse that leaves few—if any—marks. In the photo known commonly as “The Hooded Man,” a detainee stands in a Christ-like stress position. Masked and wearing a black poncho, his outstretched arms are attached to electrode-emitting wires. Unlike depictions of body damage that effectively transmit perceptions of pain, one who observes the photo of the hooded man is far less aware of and capable of comprehending the torment and affliction that entail his agony. By implementing clean torture techniques, torturers manifest their intention for the soul to retain the scars rather than the body (Cavanaugh 1998).

Asserting State Power through Destructive Humiliation

Aside from the disparities that distinguish the physical communication of pain in *The Passion* and the Abu Ghraib photos, comparable evidence of deliberate humiliation are consistent in both instances. The mocking of Jesus Christ is a distinct chapter in the trajectory leading to his crucifixion. After relentlessly flogging Christ, the Roman soldiers cloak his bleeding, weak body, adorn his head with a crown of piercing thorns, and sarcastically praise him as Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. The Romans implement crucifixions not only as punishment and deterrence, but also as a form of extreme humiliation, “By the public display of a naked victim at a prominent place... crucifixion also represented his uttermost humiliation,

which had a numinous dimension to it... The dishonor which went with it can hardly be appreciated by modern man (Hengel 1977). The U.S. military personnel at Abu Ghraib implemented comparable humiliation tactics by not only forcing detainees into Christ-like standing positions, but also by implementing nudity, orgiastic sodomy, and literally dehumanizing treatment. Male detainees were first stripped naked, then held on leashes, piled into human pyramids, or smeared in excrement, all while military personnel posed in pictures wearing sadistic grins or giving a thumbs-up (Canton 2008).

According to one government consultant, photographic documentation of the Abu Ghraib atrocities served as degrading blackmail to deter detainees from noncompliance, “[The] purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back into the population.” Humiliation plays a vital role in the following analysis of state power established and reinforced by the use of torture. William T. Cavanaugh refers to this strategy as a “confession of putrescence,” explaining:

The omnipotence of the state depends on the manifestation of its other—the revolutionary, the subversive—as filth...Torturers humiliate the victim, exploit his human weakness through the mechanism of pain, until he does take on the role of filth, confessing his lowliness and betraying his case, comrades, family, and friends. Such filth assumes an important role in the mythos of the regime (sic).

Such images resembling pornography or tourist photography attest to both the destructive and constructive nature of physical and psychological torture; torture is the production of an enemy threat and the destructive response to it. Cavanaugh builds upon this suggested notion of physical and psychological violence as a producer of state power and destroyer of individual identity, asserting in his work *Torture and Eucharist*:

[To] be truly omnipotent the state must be both the taker and the giver of life. Torture victims speak not only of the pain they endure but of the pervasive sense of powerlessness they are made to feel at the hands of their tormenters. Details seemingly insignificant in comparison to the physical abuse—irregularity of schedules, constant background music, blindfolding, frequent change of cell or location—are calculated to reduce the prisoner to a condition of powerlessness (sic).” He continues, “Torture is intended to alter a person’s identity, degrade him and strip him of human attributes, but in most cases not to kill him. The torture apparatus is meant instead for the colonization of the subjectivities of political opponents of the regime, their neutralization as opponents, and their reconstitution as coins in the currency of state power.

---


7 Ibid., 33, 38.
Elaine Scarry also speaks of the conversion of physical pain into a manifestation of oppressive state power. In her description of torture's structure, she identifies three simultaneously-occurring events: the infliction of physical pain, the objectification of the subjective attributes of pain, and the translation of the objectified attributes into the insignia of power.\(^8\) The detained victims are identified as immediate threats to state power, allegedly justifying the state’s extension of physical domination that converts the isolated, destroyed human body into authority.\(^9\) Torture extends beyond the utter destruction of the individual. For Scarry, this ritualized, state-authorized violence is the “absolute model” of destruction that unmakes civilization, human labor, and creation; for David Luban, Professor of Law and Philosophy at Georgetown University, torture creates tyrannical political relationships that directly invert the ideals of our liberal democratic social bond.\(^10\) Consequently, torture becomes an inexpensive, time-efficient alternative in asserting power through tyrannical domination. Using the scenario of U.S. War on Terror as an example, torturing detainees requires much less funding, resources, and time than the difficult task of tracking terrorist cells, intercepting their data and arms, and devising new policies to prevent possible future terror threats.\(^11\)

Similarly, Stephen C. Caton identifies the inextricable link between Christ’s corporal annihilation and the creation and assertion of the power of the Roman state, which was facing mounting resistance at that time in the Empire’s history.\(^12\) Caton explains that the paradox of sovereignty integrates the seemingly bipolar extremes of violence and law, where justice requires violence and violence in turn requires justice. He affirms that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, chose violence as a means to enforce justice and the law, thus rendering

---

\(^10\) Athey, “Torture: Alibi and Archetype,” 144.
\(^11\) Ibid., 151.
\(^12\) Caton, “The Passion of Abu Ghraib,” 117.
violence an enactment of law.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, sovereignty is founded upon the exercise of rule, and more importantly, the power to make exceptions to the rule.\textsuperscript{14} This exception, which is discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs, explains the U.S. military’s ability to convince themselves and society of the justification of systematic violence, that which is typically considered an utter obstruction of American morals and values.

\textit{Torture-Sustaining Reality}

Moving beyond these assertions of state power that emerge through the physical and psychological torment of detainees, it is essential for the sociologist to account for the societal factors that permit and advocate the use of torture within the state’s fortification of a power structure. First, it is useful for such an analysis to observe the language used to speak about torture. The moral vocabulary of torture renders it incompatible with modern morality, a barbarous offense associated with a savage, irrational past. Enlightenment criticism focused on the association of torture with the legal and moral savagery of an archaic European world, and growing moral sense of human dignity of the eighteenth century characterized the definition of torture as antithetical to human rights and the threatening enemy of jurisprudence, liberalism, law, and reason.\textsuperscript{15} Contemporary state-ratified treaties define torture as a direct affront to human rights and dignity, such as the mandate in Article 5 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.\textsuperscript{16} Despite such direct affirmations regarding the moral impermissibility of torture and its association with an ancient, backwards world, its use continues to infiltrate detention and interrogation practices.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{15} Edward Peters, \textit{Torture}, “The Sleep of Reason,” 75.
To explain such a phenomenon, Richard Jackson proposes the creation of a “torture-sustaining reality” in which torture is socially legitimized and tolerated as a result of the repeated use of highly-charged labels, narratives, and representations.\(^\text{17}\) Jackson identifies two particular narratives that are especially effective in constructing the torture-sustaining reality: the first is the identification of a powerful, threatening enemy; the second dehumanizes the enemy, rendering them “undeserving of normal human rights protection.”\(^\text{18}\) In the context of *The Passion*, Jesus Christ’s socially deviant behavior—his association with tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers—as well as his self-proclamation as the Son of God rendered him an enemy of the state, a threat to the existing social order of oppression. Jesus’ identification as such a threat enabled the masses gathered at the trail of Pontius Pilate to condemn him and release Barrabus, a true criminal. Similarly, the military personnel and the state administration officials, who authorize detention and interrogation policies, demonized the Iraqi detainees into an enemy “other” in order to justify otherwise immoral treatment. Public discourse is flooded with evidence that testifies to such dehumanization. According to Jackson, the terrorists were often described as “faceless enemies of human dignity,” as “animals and barbarian savages,” and as an evil, inhuman group outside the margins of society. In a particular statement from former President Bush, he affirms, “By their cruelty, the terrorists have chosen to live on the hunted margin of mankind. By their hatred, they have divorced themselves from the values that define civilization itself.”\(^\text{19}\) In both the context of Jesus’ crucifixion and the abuse of the Abu Ghraib detainees, the social discourse on torture functions to distance both the public and the torturers themselves from the tangible human pain and suffering of the victims.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{18}\) Ibid, 360.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 363.

Similarly, research in social psychology asserts that oppression and dehumanization become intrinsically intertwined when encountering groups defined as enemies. Professor of Psychology Susan T. Fiske explains that the specific studies prove that prejudice is attributed to outgroups perceived as threats to one’s morals and values. She confirms that neuroimaging of brain activity provides empirical, scientific evidence of hostility towards outgroups. “Categorization of people as interchangeable members of an outgroup promotes an amygdala response characteristic of vigilance and alarm and an insula response characteristic of disgust or arousal.”21 Inserting the Christian perspective into the creation of outgroup evident at Abu Ghraib, Mitchell asserts, “MPs are transferring an idea of fighting a Holy War against Unholy terrorists.”22

Furthermore, the socio-psychological analysis that embellishes the structure of Jackson’s torture-sustaining reality can be readily applied to a comparison of the systematic process of first-century Roman crucifixion and the Abu Ghraib atrocities. First-century Romano-Jewish historian Josephus provides ample information regarding the practice of crucifixion in Jerusalem during the early decades of the Common Era. Historically, teams of Roman soldiers would precede crucifixions with methodical scourging, vigilantly assuring that the beating would not render the victim unconscious and thus preventing him from carrying his crossbeam to the site of crucifixion.23 These execution teams and their superiors viewed the practice of crucifixion as a necessary evil that reinforced imperial authority over rebellious individuals. Josephus recalls the appalling example of Roman repression through mass-crucifixion during Titus’ siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, “[Roman soldiers] amused themselves by

---

nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number that space could
not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies.”

Quelling the Jewish rebellion with nearly 500 crucifixions per day, Titus and his Roman army implemented terror and capital
punishment in reasserting the legitimacy of the Roman Empire.

In a contemporary analysis of methods of corporal punishment, Fiske assesses the
compelling nature of conformity and group dynamic, citing the Milgram studies in support of
the claim that torture is partly a crime of socialized obedience. Participants in the study were
ordered to administer punishments by electric shock, and obediently did so, even to the point
of applying lethal levels. The results of this experiment demonstrated that ordinary people
could readily engage in extremely destructive behavior if ordered to do so by a legitimate
authority. The communal context described in the Abu Ghraib prison illustrates the
formidable impact of professional identity and group awareness. Clear division in rank and
high levels of competitiveness within groups enhances response to and awareness of the
presence of co-workers. Special Sabrina Harman, one of the Military Police officers who
photographed the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, revealed that the pressure to comply with her
superiors’ orders and conform to the enthusiastically abusive behavior of her fellow M.P.s
defeated her instinctive revulsion towards violence and cruelty. When asked what enabled her
comrades to exert such uninhibited brutality on the Iraqi detainees, she reasoned that they
were “more patriotic.” The notion of group dynamic broadens the understanding of ritualized
violence to include not only the state’s means for asserting power but also the individual
torturer’s means for securing personal authority, morale, and community identity.

25 S. Milgram, Obedience to Authority (Harper & Row, New York, 1974).
28 Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, “Exposure,” The New Yorker, March 24, 2008,
The controversy that surrounded the release of Mel Gibson’s record-breaking film can be attributed to a close evaluation of the twenty-first century torture-sustaining reality in the United States. As I mentioned earlier, numerous critiques of Gibson’s work attack the depiction of Christ’s crucifixion as being exceedingly violent, even sadomasochistic and pornographic. However, that is exactly what the crucifixion was and was meant to be. It is because of the unimaginably violent nature of Christ’s death that we, as Christians, exalt his incomparable sacrifice. In an interview with Father John Bartunek, author of the only authorized, behind-the-scenes explanation of *The Passion*, he explains the discrepancy between the traditional, “sanitized” Christian image of the crucifixion that has rendered Gibson’s vividly violent depiction so controversial:

One of the key things for [Gibson], and he talked about this at various times, was that he wanted to make this as realistic as possible. Because so many times we’ve become so used to seeing crucifixes and talking about flagellation, but we really don’t know what it was like. To understand the intensity of Christ’s love we really need to understand the intensity of His suffering...That’s why [the film] was rated R, because Christ really did suffer a lot. So there is meaning behind the violence.\(^{29}\)

New York Times journalist A. O. Scott elaborates on Christians’ desensitization to traditional depictions of the crucifixion, even citing the Gospels as giving overly pacified accounts of Christ’s torture and execution:

Mr. Gibson has departed radically from the tone and spirit of earlier American movies about Jesus, which have tended to be palatable (if often extremely long) Sunday school homilies designed to soothe the audience rather than to terrify or inflame it... By rubbing our faces in the grisly reality of Jesus’ death and fixing our eyes on every welt and gash on his body, this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly. Look, the movie seems to insist, when we say he died for our sins, this is what we mean.\(^{30}\)


Catholic Response to Torture

Catholic thought provides valuable insight into the reading and understanding of the Abu Ghraib atrocities in light of the *Passion* narrative. For the purpose of this analysis, the link between the violence of the crucifixion and the implications of suffering is the most important feature established by Catholic theology. Church teachings affirm that Jesus Christ is tortured today in those who are tortured. “In the man humiliated and defeated by torture we discover the Servant of Yahweh, Jesus who is crucified today, the prophet who denounces the personal and social sin of his time and ours, the Son of God dead and resurrected, present in every action which transforms History.”\(^{31}\) Catholics understand the violence attributed to his death not as mere sadistic abuse but as suffering, the ultimate self-sacrifice. Dora Apel’s artistic analysis elaborates on the image of suffering in the likeness between the Abu Ghraib photos and the crucifixion, “[Like] the mortified Christ, the image [of the Hooded Man] signals abjection and surrender. The echoes of innocence, sacrifice, and suffering that lend it a tragic air are made all the more chilling by the hooding and wires—a decidedly modern emblem of martyrdom (sic).”\(^{32}\) Furthermore, the military personnel, allegedly on a mission to spread freedom and democracy, assumed the position of “Roman torturers, crucifiers, persecutors of the humble and holy.”\(^{33}\) These images interpreted from the Catholic perspective illustrate victims as humble innocents, who—like Christ—were treated unjustly, inhumanely, and sadistically. Drawing on the tenets of Catholic teaching, linking Christ to the modern torture victim, we—as a Christian nation—must reconsider the extent to which we uphold our Christian values of human dignity and our American ideals of liberty, justice, freedom, and

---

democracy. The torture-sustaining reality that represses these images would encourage the
illusion permeating from our sanitized media that we live in a half-civilized world.34

Moreover, the Catholic notion of communion serves as a point of resistance to the
isolating practice of torture. Such ritualized violence plays on the incommunicability of pain to
isolate the victim, and we overcome such isolation by sharing in the pain. The Church calls
believers to resist these deconstructive, isolating strategies of isolation by uniting in the
tortured body of Christ.35 Christians and the Church make themselves visible in spite of
torture’s invisible nature. They communicate pain within the Christian community where
suffering is shared and overcome. The Church offers itself in solidarity with those who suffer
when She celebrates the suffering of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, an example of the visible
body resisting institutionalized violence.

The American media was initially hesitant to draw comparisons between Gibson’s
artistic portrayal of Jesus’ torture and execution and the photographic evidence of abuse at
Abu Ghraib. Though this societal repression of the Christ figure pervaded the American
response, Arab and Iranian media flooded its audience with accounts of Christian symbolism
present in the scandalous photos. Arab Keys, an Arabic Internet journal, referred to the
atrocities as “Christian terrorism,” and another site created an unsettling montage of parallel
images from Abu Ghraib and stills from Gibson’s film.36 What is revealing about these shocking
similarities is our resistance in admitting that we are like Gibson’s barbarous Romans, gleefully
sadistic in their utter destruction of the body and soul of Jesus. According to Stephanie Athey,
“Torture in the present reinvents and builds on torture of the past.”37 Clearly, the torture-

35 Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 277.
sustaining reality that defined the assertion of Roman sovereignty over two thousand years ago still resonates in the U.S. establishment of military rule in our allegedly advanced, civilized era. W. J. T. Mitchell leaves us with a thought-provoking anecdote that calls us to reassess the justification for the use of torture as a mode of aggressive state-terrorism,

“It is an uncanny revelation of the religious fantasies that haunt the war on terrorism, which is (despite the disavowals) a Holy War against Evil, a Crusade to liberate the Holy (or is it Oily) Land of the Middle East for Western Christian Free Market Democracy. It was only a matter of time before these fantasies produced an incarnate image of a real victim for us.”

Works Cited


Capitalism, AIDS, and the Loss of Morality

By Phillip Cushing

Phillip Cushing is a member of the class of 2012. He is an Economics and Sociology major and will be attending law school next year. He wrote this piece in the fall of his junior year for Dr. Michelle White’s Sociology of HIV/AIDS course. The essay was also nominated for the John D. Donovan award for the best undergraduate essay written in a sociology course. Phil would like to thank Dr. White for her daily inspiration in the classroom and for motivating him to write this piece. Also, he would like to thank the Social Eyes staff for the hours of hard work that they put into editing these essays and creating this publication.

In 1776, Adam Smith, the founder and champion of capitalism, published The Wealth of Nations, laying out the principles of a free market economy and praising his theory of The Invisible Hand, in which markets are self-regulating and support a laissez-faire economic philosophy. In his famous work, Smith provides the foundation of capitalism through his concepts of supply and demand, price, self-interest, and the profit motive (Smith, 1776). These principles, however, would lay the groundwork for more than just the world’s most popular and profitable social order. In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, world powers – drawn by the Western model and its profits – turned to capitalism and free market principles to boost their financial, industrial, and even agricultural economies. In European, African, and Asian nations alike, this unprecedented growth ushered in progressive change and, seemingly, a new era. There were “privatizations in Italy and the Ivory Coast. In Vietnam, the Government [was] encouraging privately owned small businesses, while in Hungary, the Government [offered] venture capital to local entrepreneurs” (Greenhouse, 1987: 3). Even African nations and the Soviet Union, traditionally the world’s staunchest opponent of capitalism, opened their economies to capitalist ideals. Coincidentally, however, the capitalist expansion of the early 1980’s was accompanied by the deadly HIV/AIDS disease in the developing world. While this paper does not claim that capitalism sparked the global epidemic, it argues that Adam Smith’s
ideals and the flaws of free market economies have aided the spread and continuation of the disease. Capitalism and AIDS are inextricably linked.

Using the experiences in the United States, Cuba, and China, the following sections will reveal the impact that different economic policies have had on the spread and history of the HIV/AIDS virus. This analysis highlights the differences between capitalist and communist social worlds and the social, political, and economic ideologies that influence the population. While proponents of capitalism will boast its freedoms, rights, profits, and meritocratic nature, this praise quickly becomes criticism in the face of a dire social issue like HIV/AIDS. As free market efficiency and “rationalization” trump morality and humanity, the epidemic becomes a proving ground: is capitalism truly the answer?

**Capitalism, Inequality, and Imperfect Competition**

Since the mid-19th century, the oppression and class stratification of capitalism has been well documented and exposed by economists and social theorists. In Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* he violently critiqued the capitalist model and the creation of “two great classes directly facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat,” the modern day rich and poor (Marx, 1884:103). This inequality exists both on a domestic and international scale, in the United States and Uganda alike, for the “excluded, the ‘third world’ can be on the doorstep of the ‘first world’” (Barnett and Whiteside, 2006:7). While poverty may be widespread in African nations, it is concentrated in America’s inner cities, often times a mere zip code away from the wealth and privilege of the suburbs. Smith realized that “unregulated capitalism leads inevitably toward extremes of wealth and poverty, which are not only unjust in themselves but also destroy the foundations of democracy” (Hilfiker, 2009:4). Left unchecked, the disparity between rich and poor equates wealth with power, for a voice in the ghetto is far quieter than
one on Wall Street. Following the decision in *Buckley v. Valeo* (and later expanded in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee*), political campaign contributions were considered a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment. The wealthy were essentially given unlimited access and influence over politics. This inequality was more than just immoral; it was deadly.

The United States stands as a political, military, and economic world superpower. With a gross national income per capita of $44,070, the United States more than doubles the global average and is characterized by widespread wealth and longevity of life (WHO, 2008). These numbers, however, skew the reality of life in the United States for a significant portion of the population. A trademark of capitalism, wealth and power is concentrated at the top of society, for the top 1% of the United States maintains 34% of the total wealth, while the bottom 40% controls a mere 0.2% (Wolff, 2007). HIV and AIDS lurk in this abject poverty, where basic necessities of life are scarce, leaving this population vulnerable to the fundamental causes of disease. Poverty in the United States is no different than poverty in the developing world. In both cases, “risk groups” are characterized by miserable living and working conditions, poor nutrition and minimal education. Public health officials ignore what can potentially save this oppressed group: “access to good food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, education and preventative care” (2006:29). “Band-aid” solutions and blank checks are employed, rather than infrastructural solutions that target the root of the problem. Capitalism and the disappearance of “The American Dream” create a trap for the poor from a young age. Born into impoverished families, often in dangerous and dirty neighborhoods, children are surrounded by drug-use, violence, and sexual abuse. Inner-city education is often insufficient and of poor quality, a harbinger of the inequalities to come in capitalist America. As Samuel Bowles and

39 A dream once characterized by home ownership and comfortable living, but increasingly associated with luxury items and conspicuous consumption.
Herbert Gintis point out in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, the education system is a reproduction of the job markets in the United States (1976). The poor, who receive educations from non-accredited institutions, will have little opportunity in the job market, thus continuing their marginalized existence. Wallowing in their oppressed state, the poor often turn to drug-use, violence, and gangs, all of which increase one’s exposure to HIV and AIDS. Some, especially poor women, must resort to prostitution, having to choose between hunger and disease in their struggle for survival. In the United States, these high-risk factors are centralized among African Americans in the inner city, allowing HIV to thrive amongst the dirty needles and unsafe sex of dense and destitute populations. The distribution of the disease reflects this dire situation, for new and existing cases are highest among African Americans (45% of all cases) and concentrated in metropolitan areas (UNGASS, 2010). This interplay of capitalism and AIDS presents a backward notion of supply and demand, for those who need resources do not have access, and those who have resources do not desperately need them.

On the global stage, however, the United States remains relatively unscathed by the epidemic, with an adult prevalence rate of 0.6% (WHO, 2008). As extremes of inequality exist within a nation, so too do they exist between nations. The Gross Domestic Product of Swaziland, the country maintaining the world’s highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate, is $3.001 billion (CIA Factbook, 2011). The United States’, on the other hand, is $14,624.184 billion (IMF, 2010). With little infrastructure, government, or knowledge of prevention, these nations are ravaged by HIV and AIDS. Even when they seek foreign aid in an attempt to rise out of their oppression, African nations are met with the abuse of the capitalist system. Following the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, for example, African nations were left helpless. Responding to unrest in the Middle East, patterns of panic and hoarding emerged among world powers, leading to rapidly climbing oil prices. To compensate and protect their economies, developed
countries withdrew investment and limited international trade in African nations amongst fear of risk and profit loss. These countries turned to the IMF and World Bank for loans, but at a heavy cost. Forced to agree to stabilization programs, African nations were devastated by the capitalists’ profit driven motives. These programs included tax incentives to foreign investors, competition from imported goods, creation of an export economy, higher prices, curbs on consumption, tax increases, and cuts in government spending (Kalipeni et al., 2006:206). Clearly, these loans reflect the opportunistic, almost Machiavellian motives of Western powers to profiteer from a country’s suffering and helplessness. Rather than recovery, these loans created “spiraling debt in the developing world, largely due to interest payments on loans. Total developing world debt rose from U.S. $562 billion in 1982 to $1,020 billion in 1988” (2006:206). This compounding debt corresponded with the outbreak of HIV and AIDS in Africa in the early 1980’s. With the elimination of the rural subsistence economy and health services and the creation of transportation infrastructure and a migrant population, Africa became poorer, more mobile, and less responsive – a breeding ground for HIV and AIDS. The poorer population was forced into riskier behavior. The government was unable to provide needle replacement and condom distribution programs. The export economy opened roadways to extensive travel and trade – exchanging both goods and diseases. While the spreading epidemic drew the attention of the pharmaceutical industry, it was the abject poverty that turned them away.

Health analysts agree that a vaccine is the primary hope for intervening in this dire situation in Africa. None, however, has been developed, reflecting the *imperfect competition* of capitalism. As Smith himself understood, “the economies of scale inherent in many kinds of business activities along with the political power of wealth lead inevitably under free-market conditions toward larger and fewer companies” (2009:2). As pharmaceutical companies
became larger and wealth more concentrated, niche consumers and unprofitable ventures were ignored, reflecting Marx’s concept of exchange value in which profit – rather than human need – instructs production. Poor Africans suffering from HIV/AIDS fall into both of these categories. Driven by Smith’s concepts of self-interest and the profit motive, the pharmaceutical industry has lost its intended purpose, focusing on the bottom line rather than world health. Pharmaceutical companies, for example, have used extensive lobbying and political influence to block the importation and production of low-cost, generic antiretroviral medication, thus protecting their high profits. Additionally, any research being conducted is on Clade B, the subtype of HIV most prevalent in the United States and Europe. Combined, North America and Europe comprise only 3.7% of the forty million people estimated to be living with AIDS (UNAIDS, 2003). However, they happen to be the wealthiest 3.7%. Seeing profit not as a means to an end, but rather as an end in itself, the pharmaceutical industry has embraced what Susan Craddock terms medical capitalism (2006:2). While the human need and financial resources exist to fund an AIDS vaccine, profit is still preventing development. As she clearly points out:

Pharmaceutical companies with few exceptions have shown little interest in producing an AIDS vaccine because the countries hardest hit by AIDS cannot afford to buy vaccines in quantities adequate to achieve a minimum profit margin. The primary market for a vaccine, in other words, lacks sufficient purchasing power to warrant producing a life-saving technology. (Craddock, 2006:2)

This reluctance “to spend time and money on a discovery with a high potential for saving lives but a comparatively lower potential for profits” (2006:2) reflects the paradox of research and development in a capitalist society. When private wealth is more important than the common good, the problems of the poor are ignored.

Pointing to the strict risk-reward notion of capitalist economics, a company’s level of research and development depends on the appropriability of research, “the extent to which
firms benefit from the results of their own R&D” (Blanchard, 2009:259). If pharmaceutical companies cannot make massive profits on antiretroviral medications, they will not produce them. On the other hand, if drug companies are permitted to manufacture AIDS medications under an inflated price tag, thus enabling billion dollar profits, access will be limited among those who most desperately need treatment. Again, the conflict between profits and morals looms large. In the capitalist world today, “the bottom line” screams louder than the millions of helpless sufferers, as the price – and thus death toll – continues to rise. To Adam Smith’s delight, the profit motive wins out, protected by the corrupt institution of patent laws, legislation seemingly designed to justify immorality and profit hoarding.

In response to monthly price tags for treatment of five hundred to one thousand U.S. dollars per patient, Third World governments have sought alternative means of supplying affordable medication to a populace, 44% of whom live below the poverty line (WHO, 2006). Legislation, generic medications, parallel importation, and compulsory licensing have all been employed, but met with significant opposition by those defending global free markets and capitalism, following the famous adage, “The first rule of business, protect your investment” (Etiquette of the Banker, 1775). This was most apparent in 1998-1999, months after South Africa passed legislation lowering drug prices through generic substitutes and compulsory licensing. Capitalist America, led by President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore, threatened South Africa with trade sanctions claiming that “pressure on South African drug law serves the broader public health interest”, thus reflecting the “sleazy links between U.S. pharmaceutical companies and politicians” (Bond, 1999:779). A nod to Adam Smith’s concept of the political power of wealth, pharmaceutical companies maintain one of the largest and most powerful lobbies in Washington D.C. to ensure the protection and continuation of their profit-hoarding. Additionally, The New York Times board of directors includes three
pharmaceutical leaders, reflecting the information asymmetry that Adam Smith warned against (1999:781). Through these positions of power and influence, pharmaceutical companies have shaped policy and advocated advantageous bills, such as the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS); “TRIPS marks a major departure from any such consideration of access to drugs as part of basic human rights and places primacy instead on the ‘rights’ of producers to have patents on medical products globally enforced” (2006:3). Through this agreement, patent protection extends for twenty years, production of cheaper generic medications is prohibited, and companies are able to patent previously existing medications under new uses. While the moral, humane option seems so obvious, governments conform to capitalist society, protecting the profits of major pharmaceutical companies, while – seemingly intentionally – encouraging the continuation of HIV/AIDS. A disgruntled researcher working on antiretroviral treatment puts it best: “Whenever the decision comes down to what makes more money versus what is ethical, companies will choose what makes more money” (Craddock, 2006:2). One can easily become discouraged by the bleak outlook stemming from the capitalist system. An analysis of Communism, however, reveals a vastly different history of HIV/AIDS and serves as a reminder that there is not merely one economic order.

**Communism and Sanatoriums**

The country maintaining the lowest HIV prevalence in North America is not the United States or Canada. Cuba, a Communist nation characterized by state ownership of all property and the means of production, has an adult HIV prevalence of 0.1%, leading the effort in containing and ending AIDS not only in North America, but across the globe as well (D’Adesky, 2003). With free and equitable healthcare, along with mandatory testing, the Cuban government has identified infected individuals and provided specialized care for them, thus
isolating the disease in a small population. By traditional standards, Cuba maintains an unusual AIDS policy, for in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Cuban officials instituted mandatory HIV testing and forced infected individuals into quarantine (Treaster, 1987). Despite the connotations of such isolation, the sanatoriums provide excellent living conditions, especially considering the alternatives in Cuba. “Many living in the sanatoriums are poor, previously unemployed, or lack family support outside. ‘They have a house, air conditioner, color TV, 100% of their salary and a diet very high in calories and rich in protein’” (Wade, 1989:2). This, along with monthly testing and monitoring following the three-month quarantine, has kept the small host of infected individuals under control (2003). Such measures, all without a hint of profit or corruption, reflect a government’s proper focus on health care, a focus on the individual, rather than on the bottom line. Is it a coincidence that Cuba is a Communist state and exercises repressive control over the social, economic, and political lives of its people? A study of China provides the answer.

**Communist and Capitalist Interaction**

Having analyzed both the communist and capitalist influence in isolation, a look at the two together proves most enlightening. Following Mao Zedong’s revolution in 1949, China, arguably, became the world’s greatest communist power. Despite harsh rule, Mao eliminated the widespread drug problem and provided “mass, affordable, and free healthcare. Huge campaigns were organized to fight disease-carrying insects and improve sanitary conditions in the countryside. In rural coal-mining districts and peasant villages, clinics were set up for the first time” (RWOR, 2001:2), illustrating an understanding of the value and wellbeing of one’s people. In 1976, however, capitalism reemerged in China following Mao’s death. Modern principles of capitalism developed, as the health care system became increasingly privatized.
The restoration of capitalism in China and the accompanying widespread poverty sparked the
return of drug addiction and prostitution, providing fertile ground for the rampant spread of
AIDS. “And with China’s government no longer operating to ‘serve the people,’ but instead
constantly chasing after higher profits and foreign investment, there [was] no longer mass,
affordable health care or mass health education” (2001:3). In the United States and China
alike, a capitalist regime deemphasizes the common good and transforms it into an arena for
economic efficiency and profit maximization. Poverty is not the responsibility of the state, but
rather a personal failing and a sick population is not a crisis, but another potential means of
profit.

Under this capitalist ideology, it took merely a blood shortage and an offer of twenty
dollars to spread AIDS at an unprecedented rate throughout China. In the early 1990’s,
Chinese biological companies targeted the Chinese countryside to cut costs and maximize
profit in producing blood products. Donation centers were set up across the countryside, where
education was low and, given the living conditions, risk of disease was high. Few stations were
set up with the necessary technology or trained staff to maintain a safe, sanitary environment,
as unsterilized needles and equipment were commonly used on multiple blood donors. (JCFS,
2007). HIV and AIDS spread to both donors and recipients, as entire towns became infected.
“Every family has someone who is ill, and many people have two or three…I would guess more
than 95% of people over the age of 14 or 15 sold their blood at least once…and now we are all
sick” (New York Times, 2001). The oppression of capitalism and the attraction of a few more
dollars forced the poor into a trap, choosing between survival and – unknowingly – AIDS.

Capitalism, driven by self-interest, is intended to create the greatest good for the
greatest number of people. The responses of Cuba, China, the United States, and Africa to the
AIDS epidemic, however, prove otherwise. “In 2001 alone, the five highest-paid
pharmaceutical company executives received over $183 million in compensation...‘considerably more than the entire health budget of many impoverished nations’” (Panos Institute, 2002). Who, exactly, comprises this “greatest number of people” benefitting from capitalism? The UNDP’s *Human Development Report* in 1990 perhaps put it best: while capitalism may bestow great financial wealth and economic growth on a country, “the real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth” (quoted in UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1999:1). Driven by “the bottom line,” governments favored profits over morals and patents over patients, creating abject poverty and inefficient access to resources, thus emphasizing the dark side of capitalism: extreme inequality and imperfect competition. While this paper may strike an ominous tone and seem to cry for an end to the capitalist regime, there is no need for a Marxian revolution to solve this global crisis. Through a shift in focus and motives, progress can be made in fighting the epidemic while maintaining capitalist ideals. While the United States, hyper-focused on individual rights and safety, may never enforce quarantines or mandatory testing, much can be accomplished within the boundaries of health care regulations and international law. Debts in Africa should be forgiven, realizing that an economically viable Africa is globally more profitable than one floundering in debt. A global system of price differentiation should be established, implying “that prices for key drugs in developing countries could be reduced to near the level of marginal cost, while companies would continue to earn profits on the same medications in affluent markets” (Irwin et al., 2003:131). President Obama, learning from both Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong, can issue Presidential mandates, reforming inner-city institutions and providing hope where little exists. The interplay of economics and disease is difficult to manage and leaves
many questions unanswered. One fundamental question, however, is most immediately prevalent: When will we, as a nation, as a people, and as a species, start to care? When will we make a difference? As this paper shows, we are a global community rich with knowledge and with a breadth of experience. Let’s use this now to end what we started.
Works Cited


Revolutionary Worker #1116. 2001. “China: AIDS and the epidemic of Capitalism.” *Revolution*


Zhang, Min, Hong Shang, Zhe Wang, Wei-Guo Cui, and Qing-Hai Hu. 2010. “Natural history of HIV infection in former plasma donors in rural China.” China Ministry of Health and Center for Disease Control and Prevention of Henan Province. (Retrieved from Academic OneFile on November 15, 2010.)