

ISSUES OF INDIVIDUAL CAPITALISM IN THE NARRATIVE FILM OF  
*THANK YOU FOR SMOKING AND THE COMPANY MEN*

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**ABSTRACT**

The idea of capitalism always refers to the triumph of the U.S. giant industry. In economic field, American and British capitalism is called as individual capitalism – the contrary of communal capitalism a la Japan and Germany. This paper is intended to examine the identity of economic character of individual capitalism in two Hollywood movies *Thank You for Smoking* (2006) and *The Company Men* (2010). Exploring the theory of individual and communal capitalism stated by Lester Thurow, it can be found that through mechanistic relationship, hard individual competition and unending punishment, those all erase emotional bound between individual and corporation. In short it becomes one of the reasons why American industry perishes its superiority slowly.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

History records that the Puritan Work Ethics was the forerunner belief which becomes the fundamental concept of American capitalism. At the beginning of its growth therefore capitalism cannot be isolated from the religious dogma or beliefs of its adherents. *To work is to glorify God, to working is part of worshiping to God* is to be the most powerful credo from the birth of capitalism in the 16th century. If then capitalism evolves into an economic system, surely it has experienced centuries of ups and downs. History does not neglect that after the phase of religion / belief, capitalism had functioned as a social creed. The sociological context of the birth of capitalism is characterized by the principle that the benefits derived from the Puritan work ethic constitute capital for carrying out social actions. In this phase, even those who die in prosperous and wealthy conditions are quite embarrassing, because at the same time it means that there is poverty that has occurred around him.

Today we see that capitalism has contributed to the birth of poverty on all fronts. Profit which in the 17th century was the basic capital of social activity, for the final phase of capitalism was taken as pure capital for the next production process to multiply further profits (more tangible profits). The characteristics of capitalism as an economic understanding are transformed into capital (not ethos), competition (not advocacy) and profit (not for charity).

As a view that lives and develops in American society, capitalism is also the theme of works of art including countless narration of Hollywood films. Film is a presentation that captures the situation of the community that can be a medium for understanding the culture of the community. The study of film in American society has several interesting aspects especially when using an interdisciplinary approach. As a historical document, film has a contextual relationship with the contemporary world and as a work of film it requires its own textual

analysis as well as other works of art. In other words, employing film to understand the culture of society cannot neglect film as a work of art (Hey, 1979)

We can find themes about capitalism in Hollywood films such as *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006), *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), *Moneyball* (2011), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *The Big Short* (2015) and many more. It seems that this theme has an interesting side to filmmakers as capitalism provides unlimited material related to the positive and negative sides of this credo in the development of American society and world society. Through symbols and metaphors, film packages the meaning of capitalism in various aspects, in which it is similar to what Rollins (1979) said that "...for the study of film in a social context requires interdisciplinary skills: film is laden with metaphors and symbols and symbols and is contemporary consciousness" (1979: 725)

Therefore this paper intends to explore the capitalism contained in the Hollywood film narrative namely *Thank You for Smoking* and *The Company Men*. Though both films are produced in different years, yet both have a strong capitalism theme. *Thank You for Smoking* (TFS) tells the story of Nick Naylor who works as a spokesperson for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, a company founded to defend the interests of the American cigarette industry, especially in dealing with the efforts of the anti-smoking community. Nick Naylor himself is an optimistic and smart personality, even though his personal life is not so good. As a company spokesperson he is often referred to as *The Sultan of Spin* meaning he is expert and accomplished in reversing the truth with the right argument. In *The Company Men* (TCM), the life of Bobby Walker, who is a financial executive of the GTX shipping company, has sheltered him for decades. In the end, because the company's financial situation was getting worse, an executive was also fired from the company he grew.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Film as Representation

Representation in the perspective of Stuart Hall (2003) means using language to convey something meaningful, how we understand things, people and events and then we communicate it through language. Language has a broad scope covering all sounds, words, images and anything that functions as a sign. These signs are arranged together with other signs in a system which are then able to express meaning. In Hall's view, body language, fashion, music, visual images and so on are also a sign system used to communicate meaning.

Furthermore film is a narrative structure of the world that constructs meanings associated with concepts that could have previously been in the minds of the viewer. In constructing this concept, everyone is related to what Hall calls *common shared values* (2003). Understanding certain meanings is formed based on the accumulation of interpretations by people or groups of people about what is commonly understood. In cultural practice, interpreting our surroundings based on common shared values is an important element in the production and consumption of culture.

As a designed product and through a selection process, the principle of film is to convey a message or meaning. According to Turner (1999) film not only moves reality onto the screen,



but also follows a number of conventions and rules of its own which are then referred to as the language of film. Although film language is conventional and every scene is a sign bound by convention, according to Hall there is no meaning that is absolute, universal and unchanging. The audience can develop their interpretation of the film scene they see, both at the level of denotative and connotative. Interpretation in this case depends on cultural background, knowledge, age or social conventions (2003).

## 2.2 Individual and Communal Capitalism

Noticing the nowadays capitalism, which inspires the American culture of consumption, we are no longer faced with merely economic drive with simple perspective seeking consumer convenience. George Ritzer in his book *The "Magical" World of Consumption: Transforming Nothing into Something* (2005) opens a perspective on how the influence of capitalism has succeeded in changing and even controlling what people want. With the help of mass media through various commercial advertisements, the needs of consumers are actually driven by the capitalist industry, so the consumer admits, agrees and finally consumes the needs that he does not really need. The capitalist industry is no longer merely a provider of needs, but has evolved to a more substantial stage, namely driving and controlling what is needed.

This condition has abandoned what Hagerman called moral consumption, a view that places consumption within the limits of what is needed. The American middle class has lost its moral authority to control its passions and desires in terms of consumption, in contrast to the traditional middle class in small towns who usually still maintain moral morality, but unfortunately do not have access to significant decision making.

Less and less the new middle class viewed consumption as a social issue and more and more as a social and economic necessity, perhaps even as a fundamental social and economic right. This changing attitude fed on an urban middle class world where both Calvin and the idea of work had lost most of their moral authority. While the traditional middle class of the pre-industrial town-country culture was still a moral line of defense, its political authority was lessening among the national and urban decision-makers who were shaping the twentieth-century forms of mass consumer capitalism (Hagerman, 1987: 133).

Apart from the issues related to capitalism that dragged people away from the morality of consumption, as a building of the economic system, American capitalism is often juxtaposed with other capitalism whose existence has also existed in the economic world in general. The idea of individual capitalism as the economic building of the United States is operationally at odds with communal capitalism adopted by Germany and Japan. In his book *Head to Head* (1992), economist Lester Thurow argues that the basic idea of individual capitalism *a la* American and British is on the existence of each individual in attaining the achievement of macro economic success. As part of the production chain, individual capitalism focuses more on the end result or product rather than process. Therefore in economic terms, their orientation



is often referred to as consumer economics. With the maximum product produced by individuals, more consumption will be done. "The profit maximizing Anglo Saxon business firm is derived from the rational utility-maximizing individual where more consumption and more leisure are the sole economic elements of human satisfaction (1992: 117)

This is philosophically different from German and Japanese communal capitalism which prioritizes process over outcome. Both have very broad implications, especially seen from how the existence of individuals in society and how these conditions affect relations between individuals.

One such implication is that in individual capitalism the pattern of relations between individuals is mechanistic. The existence of an individual will be determined by how much contribution he makes to the achievement of the final product of capitalism. If it holds a significant role, it is valuable to the capitalist society in which he lives. Conversely, if he has a minimal role, then his existence will become non-existent. Rewarding individual performance is a term that is often used, referring to the appreciation of the contribution of each individual in an individual capitalist society. Thurow further says "In the Anglo Saxon variant of capitalism, the individual is supposed to have a personal economic strategy for success ..". (1992: 32).

In other words, the extinction of the role of individuals in the production of individual capitalism is their personal responsibility, the corporation does not contribute to increasing the expertise or skills of individuals who work in the corporation. Therefore the phenomenon of job switching is often found in individual capitalist societies, approaching those who are unable to challenge competitively in cruel and heartless competition.

Communal capitalism, by comparison, does not take the individual as a separate existence, who fights alone to maintain its existence in the competition of production. The emphasis that the individual is part of the large building of a teamwork community is a strong credo in the communal capitalist society. "The American bonus system is keyed to rewarding individual performance, while the Japanese system is keyed to stimulating teamwork" (1992: 141).

As the orientation is toward profit maximization, a successful individual in an individual capitalistic society can impair his own corporation. In this case, the sense of individual ownership upon the institution is almost non-existent. This certainly denies what Thurow termed as "*against a universal human desire to build, to belong to an empire ...*" (1992: 118). The absence of an emotional relationship with the corporation, where the corporation is unattached with individuals, makes individual relations feel tense and very distant. Furthermore Thurow states :

In individualistic capitalism no one worries about preserving institutions. Since the group is not important, preserving any particular firm is not important. The book *Barbarians at the Gates* is an interesting story of complete individual income maximization, even if it manages the industrial empire to which the individual belongs. The profit maximizer simply doesn't care about destroying his company. The name of the game is raising his own income. (1992: 142-143).



### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative descriptive study aimed at interpreting 2 (two) Hollywood films which have the main theme of capitalism. The film is *Thank You for Smoking* (abbreviated as TFS) made in 2006 by director Jason Reitman and *The Company Men* (abbreviated as TCM) which was released in 2010 with director John Wells. Both films are interesting to study since capitalism as part of the cultural, social and economic aspects of the United States has become an inseparable part of the nation. In many ways even noticing the word *capitalism* is always related to the American people, meaning that mentioning the United States is always related to capitalism and vice versa.

Both of these films are primary data sources where the narrative elements of the film will be taken to be examined and analyzed. The narrative element of the film taken as data is plot, character and conflict in which the three are used to build an understanding of individual capitalism represented in both films. Employing Stuart Hall's perspective on film as representation, this paper intends to see and read the signs conveyed in both films. While looking for their significance in the cultural context of American society, socio-cultural backgrounds as well as American history are also used to read and interpret films as representations of American capitalist society.

### 4. DISCUSSION

#### A. Individual Status in Capitalist Industry

An individual in capitalist industry according to Lester Thurow's perspective, must have the key to his own success strategy. The keys will enable to survive in hard competition and full of change. In TFS, Nick Naylor says that his main ability in the business world is talking, arguing. This can be seen when he accompanied his son Joey Naylor to complete his school writing assignments about the superior value of the United States government. Nick told him to see the other perspective of excellence than most people think :

Nick: Write about America's amazing ability to make profit by breaking down trading rates and bringing American jobs to Third World countries. Or how good we are at executing Felons. They're all correct answers.

Joey: I can do that?

Nick: That's the beauty of argument, if you argue correctly, you're never wrong  
(TFS, 00: 24:12 - 00:24: 19)

At the end of the TFS movie Nick even clearly said "Michael Jordan plays ball. Charles Manson kills people. I talk. Everyone has a talent "(TFS, 01: 20: 15-01: 20: 18)

Nick's success strategy, therefore, is in his reliability in defending his arguments and in compelling them with universal logic understood by common people, so that he wins the



arguments, gets support even for the most sensitive issues. It was because of his expertise in establishing arguments that Nick became the spokesperson for Academy Tobacco Studies, a representative institution for the American cigarette industry tycoon. His main task is to defend the argument that cigarettes are a safe product if consumed responsibly.

In the TCM film Bobby Walker is also an individual who has his own success strategy. He is a reliable financial analyst, whose professionalism becomes the backbone of the progress of the GTX company. From the living conditions of Bobby Walker and other company executives such as Phil Woodward, Gene McClary and Sally Willcocks, it seems that they enjoy luxurious life with steady financial resources.

The measure of individual success in industries which holds individual capitalism principle as suggested by Thurow also lies in how individual plays his role in production so that it affects the final achievements, how much his existence contributes to the success of the company's progress. Nick Naylor has an important role in the cigarette company, as with his interesting and compelling arguments, the number of smokers in American society can be maintained or even increased. His main task is to maintain the impression that smoking is not harmful for adult and for that purpose he must be willing to campaign or argue with thousands of people who oppose smoking and the cigarette industry in general.

Although with a different background due to the financial recession that hit the American economy in 2010, in the TCM plot Bobby Walker also played a vital role in advancing his company. The results of proper financial calculations earned him high income gains. When his financial calculations were incorrect due to surrounding fast changing macroeconomic factors, as individual in the big corporation Bobby's position turns to be vulnerable.

## **B. Competition and Hegemony**

One of the basic philosophies of a capitalism-based economy is free competition or it is called *laissez faire*, let the market rules. Both for communal and individual capitalism, competition is the main requirement so that every element of society can play a role in it. Who wins the competition are those whose strategy can perform in the consumption economy (Thurow, 1992: 186).

The drive of competition in the American business world is very thick in both of these films which aims to illustrate whose hegemony is stronger or more influential. Competition in TFS is more directed at the goal of winning influence, considering that product is cigarettes. This competition is clearly seen between the strongholds of the Academy Tobacco Studies and Senator Finistirre, members of congress who are desperately fighting for putting the skull symbol on cigarette packs to give a stronger warning against the dangers of smoking. All means were taken to fight for influence, even the senator is taken into court for attempting to terrorize Nick Naylor to stop defending the cigarette industry. The same dirty thing is also done by Nick Naylor against patients with lung cancer who is also a former cigarette advertisement star of The Marlboro Man, Lorne Lutch. Nick bribed hundreds of millions of dollars to Lorne to stop campaigning anti-smoking. Nick's attempt was successful, Finistirre's attempt failed. In other words, seizing influence has put Nick and the cigarette industry winners.



### C. Awards and Punishments

The comparison of communal and individual capitalism put forward by Lester Thurow also concerns the existence of individual emotional ties to the company where he works. Thurow said that this emotional bond would destroy the empire of individualism *a la* America and Britain. Instinctively, Thurow said that every individual wants to be part of a community, an institution, where he can participate and contribute to the achievement of these shared goals. He further said "*One joins a team and is then successful as part of the company team .... From then on, their own personal success or failure will be closely bound up with the success or failure of the firm for which they work*" (Thurow, 1992: 33). The success of individuals and others in communal capitalism are interrelated, so that the failure of an individual, is a team failure. On the one hand, the model of individual capitalism rewards individual performance, but if the individual is no longer needed or insufficient for the industrial world, he will be easily removed. What happened to Nick Naylor and Bobby Walker shows that there is no institutional emotional bond to the workers. The failure of both characters in seeking progress for the company, does not then make the company take responsibility, but vice versa. Both are discarded so as not to burden the company where they work. In TFS it is clear how this reward and punishment mechanism works. Nick Naylor was so revered when he came up with creative ideas that the number of smokers increased, one of which was through the inclusion of smoking scenes in Hollywood films. Nick's idea was supported by The Captain, the owner of the Academy of Tobacco Studies who then budgeted tens of millions of dollars for the idea. When finally Nick Naylor was involved in a scandal with a journalist in *The Washington Post*, which endanger his professional career and company greatness, within seconds the moneymaker was fired from his job without mercy.

BR: Your job relied on your ability to keep secrets and spin the truth. I just can't imagine a way in which you could have fucked up more. There's just no way I could possibly keep you on staff.

Nick: Then I assume you're running this by the captain

BR: Captain edited this morning

(TFS, 00:11:23 - 00:11:25)

In the dialogue BR did not show any considerations whether Nick had contributed to the company or not. The interest of the company owner is to keep the company running so that anything that endangers the survival of the company will be removed.

The interesting thing to note is that Nick Naylor's victory was greatly influenced by his ability to argue, so that what was wrong could seem right. This ability as explained earlier is his talent and strategy in competition. When he argued with Senator Finistirre, he cleverly said:

Nick: Well, the real number one killer demonstrated in America is cholesterol, and here comes Senator Finistirre, whose fine state is, I regret to say, clogging the nation's arteries



with Vermont ceddar cheese. If we want to talk numbers, how about the millions of people dying of heart attacks. Perhaps Vermont cheddar should come with a skull and crossbones. (TFS, 01:10:11 - 01:10:23)

Nick managed to attack the argument that cornered the use of cigarettes by analogizing that cigarette products are as dangerous as cheddar cheese products that are the mainstay of Vermont, the place where Senator Finistierre comes from. Many participants in the hearing gave applause, not expecting that Nick Naylor's argument would reach that direction. He received tremendous appreciation, even his former boss BR returned to again offering a job at the Academy of Tobacco Studies after Nick was fired. Nick's argument broke the senator's attempt to legalise the skull symbol to be printed on the cigarette pack.

Though the scene of competition for hegemony is not strong in TCM, but the plot in the film shows how the effects of competition in the American shipping industry affect the lives of employees who have been involved in building the GTX company for decades. Without mercy, the owner of the company James Salinger step-by-step laid off his own good friends in order to increase profits and satisfy shareholders.

Gene: I'm gone for a day and you got one of my division?

James: Stock's stalled, revenues are flat

Gene: The entire economy is flat, we're in the middle of a damn recession.

James: I only closed two of the shipyards, I should have closed all three. Our stock is in the fucking toilet.

Gene: Everybody's stock is in the fucking toilet.

James: The stockholders need to see their share of maximized value

(TCM, 00:15:18 - 00:15:23)

From the dialogue it was seen that due to economic competition that resulted in recessionary conditions in the US, James Salinger could no longer maintain or even appreciate the good services of his friends who helped him develop the GTX company. Competition in the cruel capitalist industry knows no emotional connection, something that in German and Japanese communal capitalism is maintained, as part of human instinct.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Thank You for Smoking* and *The Company Men* are two Hollywood films that have succeeded in picturing the struggle of individuals in the world of large corporate America where the values of individual capitalism are strong. The position of individuals like Nick Naylor and Bobby Walker has no meaning as long as their success strategies do not contribute to the progress and profits of the company where they work. With their each expertise these two figures experienced a variety of cruel and heartless competition of American capitalist industry.

The emotional attachment between the individual and the corporation is also absent since the relationship between the two is mechanical in nature. The company is not a place to bind





employee loyalty and vice versa. Paying close attention to this, Nick and Bobby finally did what Lester Thurow wrote about leaving old jobs and changing jobs with new ones. The continuous job switching condition in Thurow's view will make the American economy decline and unstable comparing to the Japan and German capitalist economy. The sense of belonging to the institution / company, therefore becomes one of the key elements that will answer the way to advance the company and to sustain the capitalism itself.

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