

ALWAYS-ALREADY RECREATING THE “SAME OLD NIGHTMARE”: THE FUNCTION OF IDEOLOGY IN KURT VONNEGUT’S *PLAYER PIANO*

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Abstract

In my paper I challenge criticism by Robert Tally and Leonard Mustazza, who interpret Player Piano (1952) as evidence of Kurt Vonnegut's misanthropy. They contend that the proletariat revolution at the novel's conclusion fails as a result of human nature. I argue that Player Piano is a critique of capitalism, not humanity, and that the working class fails to revolt because it is oppressed by capitalist ideology. To support this claim, I establish the influence of socialism on Vonnegut's life and demonstrate that this novel depicts the tenets of Marxist theory. Finally, I apply Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses to the novel. I conclude that capitalist ideology always-already interpellates and dehumanizes the working class in Player Piano.

Player Piano, Kurt Vonnegut's debut novel, ends with the working class not only failing to overthrow the upper class—the machines and the engineers—but also participating in reinstating its oppressive reign. After destroying or disassembling every machine in Ilium, New York, the workers gather around a broken dispenser of Orange-O soda (a drink that nobody can stomach) and begin to repair this machine, which they recently had decommissioned. As the novel's protagonist, Paul Proteus, observes one of the repairmen, he notes the irony: “He was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they liked to do best, Paul supposed—replacing men like himself with machines” (Vonnegut 338). Soon, the workers are literally picking up the pieces and rebuilding their broken city and the machines that have controlled them. Before he and the other leaders of the proletarian revolution surrender to the police, Paul proposes a toast: “‘To a better world,’ he started to say, but he cut the toast short, thinking of the people of Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old nightmare. He shrugged. ‘To the record,’ he said, and smashed the empty bottle on a rock” (340). The ending of *Player Piano* raises a question that any comprehensive interpretation of the novel must answer: Why does the working class rebuild the machines, not only causing the proletarian revolution to fail but also recreating the conditions that will allow the upper class to retain its power in society?

Generally speaking, criticism on *Player Piano* interprets the conclusion in one of two ways. One approach sees the ending as evidence of Vonnegut's misanthropy. According to

this position, humanity's powerlessness originates in an innate imperfection or flaw. For Vonnegut, argues Robert Tally Jr.,

the issue is always that humans are themselves so “unnaturally” unable to do the right thing. Or rather, it is entirely in their nature to do the thing that will eventually cause them harm. It is as if humans are machines programed to self-destruct. (9)

Examining the novel's ending, Tally concludes that “the revolution that was to liberate man from machines *fails* not because of a repressive State apparatus—the army and the police—working on behalf of the machines, but precisely because of the inner failures of human, all-too-human nature” (23). Similarly, Leonard Mustazza argues that the novel “is an analysis of the human psyche . . . and a scrutiny of the human condition” (44). Comparing Vonnegut to other dystopian novelists such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, who pit a sympathetic hero against a political mechanism to critique the system, Mustazza concludes that in *Player Piano* “the force contended with is the tangled web of the self, capable of misrepresentation, of asserting humanitarian motives for strictly personal ends, of deception and inconsistency” (43). In other words, “machines have not imprisoned the people of Ilium; their own humanity has” (44). Expanding Mustazza's argument, Tally observes that

those other dystopian visions tend to pit the individual human against the dehumanizing system of the machine, such that the individual's humanity—even, or especially, in its “tragic” defeat—shines through as a force of resistance. Vonnegut, notably, does not allow for this, as he maintains that the basic impediments to human liberation and fulfillment are not the dehumanizing powers of capitalism, technology, or the totalitarian state, but humanity itself. (28)

Simply put, the revolution fails because “human beings themselves are the greatest, indeed perhaps the only, impediment to human freedom and happiness” (Tally 23). This position, represented by Tally and Mustazza, interprets *Player Piano* as a critique of human nature.

The other approach, which stems from Vonnegut's political views, interprets *Player Piano* as a critique of capitalism. In his interviews, speeches, and fiction, Vonnegut communicates a “deep affection for the working class” (Gannon and Taylor 4), championing its rights and lambasting free enterprise for being ““much too hard on the old and the sick and the shy and the poor and the stupid, and on people nobody likes”” (qtd. in Gannon and Taylor 5). Vonnegut's biographer says the novelist “objected to” the use of “capitalist ideology . . . to justify the power of the rich over the poor” (Shields 298). Vonnegut vilifies capitalism because he believes it dehumanizes the working class.

His concern for the working class originated during his formative years, when he “realized he was being raised to become bourgeois” (Shields 30). Working at his family's hardware store as a teenager, Vonnegut experienced “his first real-life lesson in social and economic disparity” when he recognized that, to the frustration of his adult coworkers, he was a beneficiary of “nepotism” (30). Later, one of his uncles gave him Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), which strafes upper class families like the Vonneguts for their “conspicuous consumption” (30).

In his adult years, Vonnegut's "concern for the working class eventually blossomed into a full-scale political outlook that was inspired by a combination of Midwestern populism and home-grown American socialism—particularly that of Eugene V. Debs," the dedicatee of as well as a character in Vonnegut's penultimate novel, *Hocus Pocus* (Gannon and Taylor 4-5). One of Debs's famous statements, which Vonnegut often quoted in speeches, summarizes the ethics of socialism: "'While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free'" (qtd. in 5). Vonnegut responds to the working class not with misanthropy, but with a "deep reverence for the oppressed human" (Gannon and Taylor 6). This concern for the working class is central to *Player Piano* as well as Marxist criticism, which "calls on a writer to commit his art to the cause of the proletariat" (Eagleton 37). Therefore, to account for Vonnegut's politics, *Player Piano* should be read as a critique of capitalism.

Indeed, the novel "reads like an exposition on Marxian political and sociological theory" (Gannon 2). The social formation it depicts is a specific type of capitalism called *state capitalism*, where the State controls the economy and functions as a corporation that controls the means of production. During the war that precedes the events of the novel, "the economy had, for efficiency's sake, become monolithic" (Vonnegut 82). In fact, "the machines and the institutions of government were . . . integrated" (313). Running the entire economy is EPICAC XIV, a computer that decides what commodities "America and her customers could have and how much they would cost" (118).

The means of production in a capitalist society exploit the working class by alienating laborers from the objects they produce. In the nineteenth-century factory system that Karl Marx condemned,

a worker would be involved only in a small part of the manufacturing process. She would never see the finished product and have no contact with potential consumers. She would thus become distanced from the products of her own labor, becoming alienated not only from others but also even from herself. (Booker 73)

The capitalist society of *Player Piano* is not content merely to alienate workers; it replaces them entirely with more efficient machines. For example, the engineers at the Ilium Works record the motions and movements of Rudy Hertz, a lathe operator, and then replace him with a machine that performs his job more quickly and efficiently than he ever could:

And here, now, this little loop in the box before Paul, here was Rudy as Rudy had been to his machine that afternoon—Rudy, the turner-on of power, the setter of speeds, the controller of the cutting tool. This was the essence of Rudy as far as his machine was concerned, as far as the economy was concerned, as far as the war effort had been concerned. The tape was the essence distilled from the small, polite man with the big hands and black fingernails

Now, by switching in lathes on a master panel and feeding them signals from the tape, Paul could make the essence of Rudy Hertz produce one, ten, a hundred, or a thousand of the shafts. (Vonnegut 10-11)

In this technocratic capitalist society, “most lower-echelon jobs” can be completed “more quickly and efficiently and cheaply by machines” (2). The result is that ““machines and organization and pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness”” (314).

The novel depicts multiple Industrial Revolutions, each of which further alienates the working class through an increasingly mechanized means of production. For example, in the First Industrial Revolution ““machines devalued muscle work,”” relieving men of manual labor (52). In the Second Industrial Revolution, which concluded before the events of the novel, the machines relieved workers of the ““annoyance or boredom that [they] used to experience in routine jobs”” (52). By the Third Industrial Revolution, the setting of the novel, machines such as EPICAC XIV ““devalue human thinking”” altogether (15). This series of Industrial Revolutions recounted in *Player Piano* brings to mind once again Karl Marx, who, writing in Europe at the end of the Industrial Revolution, “saw the inexorable contradictions that lay ahead”:

A society cannot go on making life easier with amenities and concentrating wealth while simultaneously generating an enormous discontented population. Both Marx and Vonnegut understood that the dissatisfied population will boom and, when it becomes conscious of itself, find it has nothing to lose but its chains. (Gannon 2)

According to the upper class’s version of history, however, these Industrial Revolutions have “liberated” the working class “from production” (Vonnegut 21). “Perhaps the workers are freed from having to labor,” Gannon and Taylor admit, “but they are never free from a class system that categorizes them as former laborers” (4).

The social hierarchy created by capitalism results in another form of alienation: “a separation between individuals” (Booker 73). For example, in *Ilium* the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are separated geographically. The upper class lives north of the Iroquois River, while the lower class lives south of the river—a spatial metaphor for the social hierarchy. The classes are separated by intelligence as well. In *Ilium*, ““the smarter you are, the better you are”” (Vonnegut 93). As one character remarks, ““It’s about as rigid a hierarchy as you can get . . . How’s somebody going to up his I.Q.?”” (93). ““If someone has brains . . . he can still get to the top,”” Anita, Paul’s wife, says. ““That’s the American way”” (184). A lower IQ and a southern location reinforce the reality that the proletariat occupies the bottom of society.

The perspective of an outsider, the Shah of Bratphur, emphasizes how the social hierarchy exploits the proletariat. While touring America to learn about its economy in hopes of industrializing his Third World country, the Shah, his interpreter, and Doctor Halyard, a U.S. government official, travel through *Ilium*. As they pass a road crew filling in a pothole, the Shah requests ““to know who owns these slaves”” (20). Halyard tries to explain that the workers are not slaves but American citizens, representatives of the ““average man”” (21). But, as the Shah’s interpreter explains, ““this *average man*, there is no equivalent in our language”” (21), for in Bratphur there ““are only the Elite and the *Takaru* [slave]”” (22). The

Shah's perspective exposes the social reality in *Ilium*: regardless of how the upper class labels the working class, the class system still exists.

Eventually, the dehumanizing means of production in this capitalist society cause the proletariat to revolt against the bourgeoisie. The proletarian revolution at the end of *Player Piano*, however, is not the first one the working class in *Ilium* has attempted. When the workers returned from fighting the war, which took place more than a decade before the events of the novel, they realized the "managers and engineers [had] learned to get along without their men and women" (1). In response, the proletariat revolted, but the resistance was unsuccessful. These workers who "had been the rioters, the smashers of machines" (29), during *that* revolution rise up again at the end of the novel to destroy the machines. Inexplicably, however, they begin rebuilding the machines, recreating the conditions amiable to the technocratic upper class. But if the means of production in this capitalist society dehumanize the proletariat, who is aware of its oppression and has attempted to overthrow its oppressors, how does the upper class convince the workers to reproduce the conditions necessary for its existence and their exploitation?

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser attempts to answer this question in his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." He argues that a capitalist society ensures its existence because the working class continually submits to the ideology of the ruling class:

the reproduction of labour power requires . . . a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression. (89)

Marxist criticism, which "aims to understand ideologies," defines *ideology* as "the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times" (Eagleton viii). Further, it asserts that "the function of ideology . . . is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society," because, "in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class" (5).

Unlike traditional definitions of ideology as an amorphous, metaphysical force, Althusser considers ideology to be material: "An ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (112). Like Pascal, who said, "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and then you will believe" (qtd. in Althusser 114), Althusser argues that an individual's belief in and submission to the dominant ideology is a product of that person's participation in the practices of various material institutions in society. Althusser seeks to expand the traditional Marxist understanding of the State as "a 'machine' of repression which enables the ruling classes . . . to ensure their domination over the working class" (92). Since, he says, "no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses" (98), he analyzes the material apparatuses that manifest the ideology of the ruling class. He classifies these apparatuses as one of two types: the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The RSAs—State-controlled public institutions such as the army, the police, the government, the prisons, and

the courts—function by violence. On the other hand, the ISAs—private institutions such as the family, the Church, the educational system, the cultural institutions, and the communication institutions—function by ideology. In other words, the Ideological State Apparatuses “subtly mold human subjects through ideology, in turn reproducing the system” (“Louis” 1332).

Combining this conception of ideology with structuralism, Althusser concludes that ideology always-already acts upon individuals. The dominant ideology in society preexists the lives of its citizens and thus determines their lives through a process Althusser calls *interpellation*:

Ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (118)

It is important to note that the interpellation of individuals is “one and the same thing” as “the existence of ideology” (118). Since the ideology of the ruling class is ubiquitous in society, “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*” (119). As the subject of ideology, an individual assumes “a position as a person with certain views and values, which, however, in every instance serve the ultimate interests of the ruling class” (Abrams 158). Interpellation, therefore, “allows the existing power structure of capitalist society to maintain its domination over the general population without resorting to violence or force” (Booker 82).

By participating in the practices of Ideological State Apparatuses, the people in *Player Piano* subscribe to the dehumanizing ideology of the ruling class. Althusser explains, for example, that the educational ISA determines a person’s worth based on his perceived value to society, preparing the intelligent students to become “the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers)” and ejecting those deemed unintelligent ““into production”” (105). In *Player Piano*, the educational ISA operates identically. The National General Classifications Test, which all citizens take, rewards those who are considered intelligent with a college education and punishes those who are considered unintelligent with lifelong service in either the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. As Althusser says, the educational ISA is “wrapped in the ruling ideology” (104), preparing graduates to become managers and engineers who will maintain the exploitation of the working class: “This elite business, this assurance of superiority, this sense of rightness about the hierarchy topped by managers and engineers—this was instilled in all college graduates, and there were no bones about it” (Vonnegut 6).

The ideology of the ruling class has structured the family ISA, typified by the Hagstrohm family, to dehumanize the working class. The Hagstrohm’s M-17 house, designed by the State and sold to the workers, comes equipped with machines that supposedly give

humans more time to “Live! Get a little fun out of life” (164). Replaced by machines—such as an ultrasonic dishwasher and washing machine that clean more efficiently and quickly than a human ever could—Mrs. Hagstrohm spends her free time watching television. It is only when the washing machine breaks and she has to wash her family’s clothes by hand in the bathtub that she experiences a sense of purpose and worth: “It’s kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don’t mind. It gives me something to do” (165). Matthew Gannon puts it this way: “The advanced technology in *Player Piano* hasn’t liberated humanity, only furthered their exploitation. Their lives are easier, but not more meaningful” (4).

Likewise, by concealing the dehumanizing conditions of the working class, the cultural ISA espouses the ideology of the ruling class. A television sitcom about a working class family depicts the home as the epitome of domestic bliss. The father, who works in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, is “cheery, pink, in first-rate health” (Vonnegut 261). The mother convinces her son, who has discovered the low IQs of his parents (this information is public knowledge in Ilium), that “some of the unhappiest people in this world are the smartest ones” (260). Similarly, a drama performed at the engineers’ gathering at The Meadows assures the members of the upper class that the proletariat depends on them: “the play’s message . . . [was] that the common man wasn’t nearly as grateful as he should be for what the engineers and managers had given him” (220). Furthermore, the National Council of Arts and Letters censors an author whose novel “had an antimachine theme” (244). The books that are published in Ilium—such as the Dog Story of the Month—are those written to match the research on the public’s tastes.

The communications ISA also disseminates the dominant ideology. The public relations institution ensures the dominant ideology is transmitted clearly. Public relations, Doctor Halyard explains, specializes

in the cultivation, by applied psychology in mass communication media, of favorable public opinion with regard to controversial issues and institutions, without being offensive to anyone of importance, and with the continued stability of the economy and society its primary goal. (242)

For example, an advertising campaign in Ilium that attempted to make people “think the managers and engineers had given America everything: forests, rivers, minerals, mountains, oil—the works” (91) was an effort “to make big business popular” (92). Clearly, the communications ISA effectively transmitted the ideology of the ruling class, for Ilium now exemplifies a capitalist social formation with the managers and engineers at the top of society. This, Althusser explains, is the power of Ideological State Apparatuses: “The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of State power alone. It is by the installation of the ISAs in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology” (125).

Therefore, according to Althusser’s analysis of ideology, the workers in *Player Piano* rebuild the machines that replaced them, thus participating in their own exploitation, because the dehumanizing ideology of the upper class always-already interpellates them, making them “thorough believers in mechanization . . . even when their lives had been badly damaged by mechanization” (Vonnegut 253). This technocratic capitalist society has preprogrammed its

citizens to submit to the belief that “man is on earth to create more durable and efficient images of himself, and, hence, to eliminate any justification at all for his own continued existence” (302-3). One character describes the situation this way: “People are finding out that, because of the way the machines are changing the world, more and more of their values don’t apply any more. People have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves, or wards of machines” (290).

A Marxist reading of *Player Piano* concludes that the novel, ultimately, critiques capitalism, not humanity. Vonnegut blames the socioeconomic system, not the working class. Establishing Vonnegut’s politics in *Player Piano* is important, because, as many critics have noted, this debut novel introduces many of the themes found throughout Vonnegut’s corpus. Even though Robert Tally misidentifies the target of Vonnegut’s criticism in *Player Piano*, he correctly detects Vonnegut’s pessimistic tone, unlike Matthew Gannon, who thinks the message of *Player Piano* is optimistic—that the novel is “about the noble quest to regain humanity in the wake of dehumanizing conditions” (2). From this perspective, Gannon interprets the novel’s final lines (“This isn’t the end, you know . . . Nothing ever is, nothing ever will be—not even Judgment Day” [Vonnegut 341]) as “a glimmer of unblemished redemptive possibility” (5). However, from a perspective informed by Louis Althusser, who “argue[s] that freedom of thought and action is limited by . . . socioeconomic systems” (“Louis” 1332), the final lines take on a much more ominous tone, for they suggest that there will always be a ruling class exploiting the working class. Since workers are always-already in submission to capitalist ideology, Vonnegut does not see much hope in their overthrowing their oppressors.

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