

Marxian Sociology On Class Inequality In The Movie ‘Parasite’

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Received: 15 May 2025 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 May 2025, Published: 31 May 2025

Abstract

The 2019 South Korean film *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, is a powerful cinematic exploration of class inequality and social stratification. This paper analyzes *Parasite* through the lens of Marxian sociology, focusing on Karl Marx's concepts of class conflict, alienation, surplus value, and the bourgeois-proletariat divide. The film metaphorically represents the class struggle between the wealthy Park family and the impoverished Kim family, showcasing how capitalism sustains and normalizes systemic inequality. The vertical hierarchy of living spaces, the symbolic use of architecture and space, and the characters' socioeconomic roles highlight the structural disparities and the illusion of social mobility. This research critically examines how the film portrays capitalist exploitation and false consciousness, emphasizing the perpetuation of class domination and the illusion of meritocracy. The study concludes that *Parasite* serves not merely as a social commentary but as a vivid Marxist critique of modern capitalist societies, where economic structures dictate life chances, relationships, and identities.

Keywords: Marxian Sociology, Class Inequality, Capitalism, Bourgeoisie and Proletariat, False Consciousness, Class Conflict, Alienation, Parasite Movie Analysis

Introduction

The Korean movie *Parasite*, which had its world debut in May 2019, was honoured with the Palme d'Or, the festival's top honour, at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival,¹ won Best Foreign Language Film at the 77th Golden Globe Prize,² and four Oscars.³ The movie emphasise a sombre portrayal of class relations and struggle in the world. The Kim family, struggling with poverty in a South Korean city, consists of parents Ki-taek and Chung-sook and their children, Ki-woo and Ki-jung. They struggle to find work until Ki-woo's friend Min-hyuk offers him a tutoring job for the wealthy Park family. Ki-woo meets Mrs. Park, who hires him to tutor Da-hye. Learning that her son, Da-song, needs an art teacher, Ki-woo recommends “Jessica” (Ki-jung), who impresses Mrs. Park and is hired. Soon, the siblings orchestrate jobs for their parents—Ki-taek replaces the Parks' driver after they frame the previous one, and Chung-sook becomes the housekeeper after they trick Mrs. Park into firing Moon-gwang.

When the Parks leave for a camping trip, the Kims enjoy their empty mansion. However, Moon-gwang returns, revealing a hidden bunker where her husband, Geun-sae, has been hiding from loan sharks. A confrontation ensues, and Moon-gwang discovers the Kims' deception, threatening to expose them. A struggle breaks out, and the Kims trap Moon-gwang and Geun-sae in the bunker. Suddenly, Mrs. Park calls, announcing their early return due to heavy rain. The Kims hide, but Chung-sook kills Moon-gwang to prevent exposure. That night, Mr. Park and his wife sleep on the couch, unaware that Ki-taek is hiding under the table

¹ ‘Cannes 2019: Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* Wins the Palme d'Or – as It Happened | Cannes 2019’ (*The Guardian*) <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/live/2019/may/25/cannes-film-festival-2019-palme-dor-winner-announced-live>> accessed 3 October 2022.

² ‘2020 Golden Globes Nominations: Full List of Nominees’ (*Variety*) <<https://variety.com/feature/2020-golden-globes-nominations-list-nominees-1203426905/>> accessed 7 October 2022.

³ “‘Parasite’ Earns Six Oscar Nominations, Including Best Picture’ (*The Korea Herald*) <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200113000836>> accessed 2 October 2022.

and overhearing Park complaining about his odor. The Kims escape but return home to find their basement apartment flooded. The next day, Mrs. Park summons them for Da-song's birthday party.

Ki-woo visits the basement but is attacked by Geun-sae, who then crashes the party and fatally stabs Ki-jung. Amidst the chaos, Mr. Park orders Ki-taek to toss him his car keys, but when he recoils at Geun-sae's corpse's smell, Ki-taek, enraged, stabs Mr. Park and flees. Ki-woo wakes up in the hospital and learns of the tragedy. He later discovers that his father is hiding in the bunker, signaling him through Morse code. Ki-woo dreams of earning enough money to buy the house and reunite with his father, but the film ends ambiguously, leaving his dream unrealized. Going behind the Curtain: Cinematic Appraisal of the movie

The primary themes that are explored in the movie are class, capitalism, and colonialism. The Kims are a struggling family that are first presented to us at the beginning of the movie. They learn how simple some people's lives are and how much more opulently some people live when they each land jobs working for the rich Park family. They fight with Moon-gwang and her husband, who are also attempting to profit from the wealth of the Park family, throughout the movie as they crave the lifestyles of their bosses.⁴

Throughout the movie, wealth is shown in a variety of ways. It is portrayed as something that makes one friendlier, brighter, and more natural, yet it may also dull one's sense of responsibility and purpose and make one seem "out of touch." The Parks are kind people, but they are also often naïve, superficial, and powerless.⁵ The Kim family's aspiration to live in security via riches endures throughout the movie, with Ki-woo dreaming of purchasing the Parks' old home at the conclusion. The movie also aims to demonstrate how inequality of income and class leads to the violence that breaks out in the last act.⁶

The class conflict portrayed by Bong Joon-ho is one that is closely related to the injustices inherent in a capitalistic economy. Compared to any Kim family member, Mr. Park is a well-educated businessman who has been given a lot more possibilities. He already comes from an affluent family, which has given him chances.⁷ The Kims' predicament, where they are unable to find work that would sustain them, is not a reflection of their skills, but rather of where they are in a capitalist system.

The idea of colonialism is woven into this portrayal of capitalism. The Parks have a sense of entitlement to occupy more territory than the Kims, which is a colonial attitude in and of itself. The tale might be interpreted as an allegory for the colonialism that characterises the expansion of capitalism. Even the fact that young Da-song and his father Mr. Park are sporting Native American headdresses as the violence erupts at the celebration alludes to this idea.⁸

Major Symbols in Minor Scenes: Analysing the Cinematics

The cinematographic brilliance of "Parasite" makes it simple to lose focus. The audience is riveted and waiting on the edge of their seats for the next twist thanks to the precise camera angles and pace. As a result, the movie should be seen at least twice—once for the aesthetics and again for the main message. The movie has a

⁴ ibid.

⁵ Colson Legras, 'Class, Colonialism, and Gender in Parasite (2019)' Open Oregon <<https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/dpdfilm/chapter/parasite-2019/>> accessed 13 October 2022.

⁶ Tomris Laffly, 'Bong Joon-Ho on the Themes and Crafts of His Must-See Film, Parasite' (Roger Ebert) <<https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/bong-joon-ho-on-the-themes-and-crafts-of-his-must-see-film-parasite>> accessed 5 October 2022.

⁷ Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi (n 9).

⁸ Colson Legras (n 13).

significant message that is hidden under its clean aesthetic. Following are the major symbols used in the film, that are expressed through stunning visuals and scenes:

The storm's heavy downpour was used in the movie to highlight the disparity between affluent and poor lifestyles. As the rain was viewed differently from the perspectives of the Parks, the Kims. While the unprivileged saw the rain as a moment of anguish and a threat to their life and homes, Parks saw it as romantic and an intimate moment.⁹

By framing the rain in two separate ways—romantic for the Parks and disturbing for the Kims—it was possible to make it appear different for each section. This was accomplished by contrasting the cinematography or the way it depicted rain in two distinct scenarios. In the first instance, we see the Parks relaxing on their sofa and taking in the rain as it pours outside their huge glass wall. One may observe the Kim family in the Park home taking the same kind of pleasure in the rain. On the other side, we witness the Kims' home flooding and becoming completely inundated in rainwater.

Other than this, class issues in the movie were well shown using architectural language. In order to illustrate how individuals are related to the areas they are living, *Parasite* made use of windows, stairs, and lighting. The concept of affluent people residing in residences located stairways above the impoverished areas and poor people residing in flats in the semi-basement addressed the politics of constructing a home. The front-facing windows of each residence were constructed so that they almost mirrored the windows of the next home.¹⁰ The window is narrow for the impoverished family, who can only see a drunken man urinating outside. A bigger window with a view of a lovely garden was made for the wealthy family. The wealthy family lives on land, whereas the impoverished family dwells underground.¹¹

Viewing *Parasite* from a Sociological Lens of KARL MARX

Marx was influenced by a wide range of intellectual movements. However, Georg Hegel was the one who left the biggest impression on him. The idea of the dialectics served as the foundation for Hegel's philosophy. The three-step process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is a part of dialectical thought.¹² According to Hegel, the opposite thought, or antithesis, is also conceivable for any notion, or thesis, that may be imagined. The thesis will inevitably fail due to these inconsistencies, and a new thing known as the synthesis will appear from the union of two opposites. Another dialectical process starts at this moment when the synthesis turns into the thesis and then runs into its oppositional antithesis, creating yet another synthesis, and so on. The conclusion of the dialectics is that the growth of human awareness follows a logical but contradictory pattern.¹³

In the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), Marx and Engels adamantly declare that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”¹⁴ Marx asserts that socioeconomic tensions, disputes, and hostilities between the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, have been a feature of all Western civilizations. Marx holds that because it results in their exploitation and oppression, socioeconomic strife is bad for the lower strata of society in the short run. However, in the long run, socioeconomic conflict

⁹ JT Trinidad (n 4).

¹⁰ Baker (n 19).

¹¹ Logan Baker, ‘Cinematography Breakdown: Creating the Look of *Parasite*’ (*The Beat: A Blog by PremiumBeat*, 27 February 2020) <<https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/creating-the-look-of-parasite/>> accessed 2 October 2022.

¹² Maurice Cornforth, *Materialism and the Dialectical Method* (1953) 78.

¹³ *ibid* 78-83.

¹⁴ Cornforth (n 28).

plays a role in the dialectical development of society because it is only through class conflict that the current socioeconomic system may be overthrown and replaced with a new one.¹⁵

In *The German Ideology* (1845-1846), Marx identifies six successive socioeconomic stages of history: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism.¹⁶ Before focusing on capitalism and analysing its more prominent characteristics, we shall first analyse the three precapitalist stages. Finally, the conclusion shall provide a brief look at socialism and communism.

The First Stage: Primitive Communism

Marx believed that small-scale hunting and gathering communities predominated during the early stages of primitive communism. People gathered in towns where there was a clear division of labour:¹⁷ While the women tended the fires, foraged for food, and took care of the young, the men tracked and killed wild wildlife. Private property was not a concept. All fundamental resources were shared by all members of this pre-class society.

The Second Stage: Ownership of Private Property

The second socioeconomic stage of development began with the emergence of private property.¹⁸ Humans owned people as chattel in addition to owning land, homes, and animals used for labour. Ancient Greece and Rome had a slave economy, with slave labour playing a significant role in the manufacture of necessities. As a result, the citizens and the slaves, two significant groups of oppressors and victims, emerged.¹⁹

The Third Stage: Feudalism

The third socioeconomic stage of history was the system of land ownership, called feudalism, that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages.²⁰ This kind of civilization was predominately agrarian, with enslaved peasants living on the estate as tenants of the landowner and the produce being grown on arable land controlled by the feudal lord. The serfs farmed the land, paid labour rent, and received a tiny portion of the harvest in exchange for the right to occupy. Despite the fact that the majority of the serfs were free under the law, they had no recourse against the landlords and were usually subject to onerous demands for rent, taxes, and other payments.

The Fourth Stage: Capitalism

Although both Marxist and non-Marxist historians have recognised various "types" or "phases" of capitalism, we shall here only focus on the one to which Marx and Engels specifically focused their fundamental criticisms: industrial capitalism.²¹ Industrial capitalism rose to popularity in the mid-1800s, especially in England. It heavily relied on the utilisation of power-driven machinery with the goal of mass producing goods in order to sell them on the open market. Thus, it may be claimed that the core of industrial capitalism was a market economy based on the manufacturing of commodities.²²

¹⁵ George C. Comninel, *Capital and Historical Materialism* (2012) 318.

¹⁶ Cornforth (n 28) 44.

¹⁷ Claudio Katz, 'Karl Marx on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism' 22 (1993) 363-389.

¹⁸ A. Javier Treviño, *The Sociology of Law* (Routledge, 2008) 96.

¹⁹ Treviño (n 33).

²⁰ Katz (n 32).

²¹ Robert Daniels, 'Marx and the Movement of History' (*Yale*, 31 October 2013) <<https://academic.oup.com/yale-scholarship-online/book/17686/chapter-abstract/175370232?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=true>> accessed 12 October 2022.

²² *ibid.*

There are a number of distinctive traits that define industrial capitalism. First, the means of production are primarily owned privately. Second, goods are created and distributed solely for personal gain or financial gain. Third, money is viewed as the common form of trade and labour is treated as a commodity that can be purchased and sold. Additionally, rivalry is promoted between business owners who own the means of production as well as between employees who sell their labour. The philosophy of laissez-faire, which holds that private initiative in the creation and production of goods must not be constrained by the government, is the most important factor.²³ Implied in each one of these features of capitalism is the idea of class conflict.

Marx argued that there were two main antagonistic social classes in capitalist society: the capitalist class, also known as the bourgeoisie, and the working class, often known as the proletariat.²⁴ These two classes' social interactions divided society into opposing factions of oppressors and rulers. The material powers of production, including labour, raw materials, land, equipment, factories, and other tools and machinery, are owned and under the authority of the bourgeoisie, the dominant class in society. The bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat by not paying them the full value of the labour they expend in order to maximise profits for the goods they produce. The propertyless and inferior socioeconomic class is known as the proletariat.²⁵ The workers themselves are considered as saleable commodities rather than as human beings since the bourgeoisie buys and sells the workers' labour force. This led to the development of the Marxist concept of alienation, which is characterised as a feeling of estrangement or detachment that develops when the results of a person's activities are at odds with, or distanced from, their creations, motives, desires, and aspirations. Under capitalism, alienation takes four general forms.²⁶

The Fifth Stage: Socialism

Marx argues in *The German Ideology* that a specific mode of production, or an economic system through which products and services are produced, exchanged, and distributed, is required for all human civilizations to thrive.²⁷ Three pre-capitalist systems of production—primitive communism, slavery, and feudalism—existed in the West, as already shown. However, the mode of production under capitalism is significantly more intricate and consists of both the social and material forces of production.

In order to produce their means of subsistence, people might influence and change their social environment thanks to the material forces of production. These forces are made up of labour force, production equipment, and raw materials.²⁸ The ability to work refers to our labour force, while the tools, factories, and other industrial technology are the means of production. The raw materials of production are the earth's natural resources, such as coal, iron ore, water, and land.

The social relations of production, or the relationships between people about ownership of productive forces, are a result of the material forces of production. According to Marx, the social relations of production that develop in a capitalist society can be broadly summarised as follows: The members of the oppressed class only possess their labour power, which they sell for pay, while the members of the ruling class privately own and control the means of production.²⁹ The ruling class legally owns as property (i.e., as a good or

²³ Katz (n 32).

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Katz (n 32).

²⁷ Treviño (n 33).

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Treviño (n 33).

“commodity”) the labour power of the workers. Consequently, the social relations of production are, in their legal form, transformed into property relations.

Marx refers to a society's mode of production as its economic base. The “economic base largely determines society's superstructure, which consists of the various social institutions (political, legal, etc.) as well as the various ideologies,” and since “the superstructure has its foundation in the economic base, a change in the latter will bring about a corresponding change in the former.”³⁰

Marx held that the social revolution necessary to usher in the socioeconomic stage of socialism can only take place when the social relations of production clash with the material forces driving them. The advancement of society is being driven by this conflict. Marx was adamant that capitalism will eventually collapse. He asserted that a fifth, intermediate stage of socioeconomic growth known as socialism would replace the capitalist society.³¹ The elimination of private ownership of the means of production is a component of socialism. Instead, the means of production are collectively held, and the notion is that production should be employed for the benefit of society as a whole rather than for personal gain.³²

The Sixth Stage: Communism

Finally, Marx's sixth and ultimate socioeconomic stage of historical development is communism, which he regarded as humanity's inevitable destiny.³³ This final stage is characterized by “both a communitarian mode of production and the abolition of all social classes resulting in the disappearance of class oppression. It is at this point in history that Marx felt people would achieve self-determination and realize true emancipation, becoming free of all forms of alienation;” perhaps the best description of the social relations of production in the communist society is given by Marx in Critique of the Gotha Program when he states: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”³⁴

The Message Conveyed: Understanding the Evils and Implications of Capitalism for Development

In contrast to describing them from our daily encounters, movies reflect the impression of how we live side by side as human beings and how it is simple to see what worries us, our attitudes, as well as our strengths and shortcomings in the film. Director and co-writer Bong Joon-ho has attempted to uncover a double-edged sword in the film *Parasite* by spotlighting capitalism as the dominating ideology in the modern world while simultaneously exposing its flaws and inequities. The director of *Parasite* notes that he “wanted to be honest and not spread random hope to the audience but instead to reflect the truth of current times.”³⁵ On the backdrop of the movie summary and the relevant themes, symbols, and motifs described, this section shall explore various tenets of the movie *Parasite* in terms of capitalist ideology and provide a social message the film aims to convey.

The Money Divide

Many Western societies today, including South Korea, are dominated by capitalism. Adhering to the procedures, practises, and codes of what one may and cannot say, under what circumstances, etc., that are part of the discourse rules of the capitalist ideology is a necessary component of what it means to identify with it. The wealthy couple only needs to consider "How good is this, and how much will it enhance our life?" rather

³⁰ Daniels (n 32).

³¹ Daniels (n 32).

³² Treviño (n 33).

³³ Katz (n 11).

³⁴ Elias Khalil, ‘Marx's Understanding of the Essence of Capitalism’ 17 (1992) History of Economics Review 19-32.

³⁵ See Emily Stier Adler, ‘Film Review of Parasite’ 7 (2022) SBG 1.

than "How much is this?" They never engage in a frugal calculus of negotiation; they don't try to bargain for a lower price or inquire as to why something costs what it does. They speak of money in a subdued, casual manner. The poor Kim family, in contrast, speaks about money precisely and cautiously.

Fairly speaking, one could assert that the gap between the wealthy and the poor when it comes to discussing money is not a result of ideology per se. The Parks don't discuss money because they don't have to; they can buy almost everything they want, whereas the Kims have the exact opposite situation. The Kims, on the other hand, deliberately imitate this routine surrounding the mention of money as they carry out their strategy, fully aware that the wealthy avoid the subject in their conversations. In essence, the movie contrasts the two families' approaches to talking about money and proposes that this discrepancy is a common feature of contemporary capitalist society.

A Plan: To Be or Not To Be?

One of the movie's motifs, the "plan," is another instance of ideology in action. The Kim family's language is mainly focused on the concept of the "plan," and although they never state it overtly, it is pretty obvious that it suggests a concern for money and financial security. One of capitalism's core tenets may be artfully condensed as follows: if you want to make money, plan for it wisely, and faithfully carry it out, success will come your way. On the other hand, you are doomed to remain poor if you don't have a strategy and live life aimlessly with no interest in making money. The "plan" deftly illustrates how capitalist ideology obscures the structural inequities that are inherent in its systems of production and instead asserts that an individual's success is exclusively dependent upon his or her own goals, intentions, and abilities.

House: A Capitalist Structure

The Park family's home might be regarded as having an additional unquestionable significance as a manifestation of philosophy. One is that the house functions as a hierarchy by design. The Parks' former maid, Moon, and her husband (the "underman") spent four years living covertly in the home's underground bunker, as we later learn. The fact that the man's identity is never disclosed could serve as evidence of how invisible and anonymous the impoverished are. The rich Parks enjoy their opulent pleasures on the second story of the mansion, while the former servants struggle to make ends meet on the lowest floor. In fact, even after the Kims break into the Park family's house, the majority of their contacts take place on the first level, and the movie seldom ever shows the Kim family engaging with the Park family there.

On the one hand, capitalism guarantees social order. Capitalist societies promise wealth and peace through effective forms of production and a strong civil-consumer society that protects laws of ownership, property, and financial exchange. However, if this is what capitalist ideology claims, then the way capitalism is really practised demonstrates something completely different. The widespread use of violence, war, and death in capitalist countries is a disturbing trend. In actuality, the general structure has survived due to the brutal suppression of the working class and the forced extraction of their labour. Simply defined, the conflict arises from the fact that capitalism calls for constant levels of violence in order to function while still promising prosperity and peace for all.

In the movie's climax, Kevin discovers that his father is hidden beneath the basement floor he used to detest and makes a vow to him that he will work hard to earn enough money to buy the family home. The house will therefore continue to exist as a place of dwelling and, concurrently, as a place of violent conflict, according to the movie's ending. What the home vividly demonstrates is that the mechanisms of capitalist regimes are difficult to overthrow, and as long as they do, order and chaos, death and prosperity, and violence and peace

will continue to mingle and emerge as competing, coexisting aspects of society. The blood-soaked birthday celebration is drowned out by the life-or-death class conflict that has taken over the entire house. In other words, violence is the means by which the realities and all secrets hidden behind ideologies come to light. The image is consistent with one of Karl Marx's central theories, which holds that the working class must wage a bloody revolution in order to remove the mask of capitalist ideology.

The Staircase of Status

In the sociological realm, while social class reflects “large numbers of people who have similar amounts of income and education and who work at jobs that are roughly comparable in prestige,” status determines “the position that someone occupies in a social group.”³⁶ A judge or an astronaut are examples of positions with high prestige, while a waitress or a convenience store clerk are examples of positions with low prestige. It establishes the fundamental framework of the social system in which we reside and gives us instructions on how to behave or feel. Statuses impose restrictions on what we can and cannot do, just as other facets of the social order. All human groupings have social statuses because they are a fundamental component of the social structure.

The Kims' father Ki-taek is pictured climbing an escalator with the Parks' mother during the Kim family's intrusion into the wealthy Park household, illustrating the Kim family's rise into a higher level of class and potential. They are compelled to return home in the middle of the night during a thunderstorm in the second half of the movie when their plan begins to go apart, scaling down multiple flights of stairs in the pouring rain. The Kim family is shown descending the stairs in a succession of broad views to represent their ascent down the social scale as their standing in the Park household, and consequently, their financial security, is jeopardised.

When Mr. and Mrs. Park are seen laying together on their couch in another scene, the camera lowers to a low angle to see the Kims nearby, hiding beneath a table. This reiterates the class allegory in which one is physically superior to the other, highlighting the helplessness of the Kims under them who are compelled to remain silent and undiscovered. Both alienation and class consciousness are obvious.

Dream or Obsession?

The film's racial undertones, including Da-peculiar song's fixation on Native Americans, are linked with its issues of class and capitalism and are particularly intriguing. He carries a toy bow and arrow, dons a headdress, and spends his nights outside in a tepee because of his odd preoccupation with Native American stereotypes. His parents were the focus of his birthday celebration. When Da-toys song's are mentioned, his mother always says that she "ordered it from the U.S.," its significance becomes more apparent.

The specificity of such statement shows that it is much more than just a compliment to the reputed high quality of American-made products. It appears to be a criticism on colonialism, imperialism, and how the United States transmitted capitalism and similar ideals throughout its westward expansion in Native American land in the 19th century as well as its post-war ascension to superpower status. This is especially true for South Korea, whose alliance with American political and military interests and embrace of neoliberal economic policies account for a large part of its existence and success. Similar to how the Parks adopted American consumer goods like the tepee and bow and arrow, so did South Korea import American capitalism's stratified social structure and its monetization of cultures, as evidenced by Da-infatuation song's with Native Americans.

³⁶ James Henslin, *Essentials of Sociology* (11th edn, 2015) 100.

Critical Analysis

In his official statement for Cannes Film Festival, Bong Joon-ho contends that “it is increasingly the case in this sad world that humane relationships based on co-existence or symbiosis cannot hold, and one group is pushed into a parasitic relationship with another. In the midst of such a world, who can point their finger at a struggling family, locked in a fight for survival, and call them parasites? It’s not that they were parasites from the start. They are our neighbours, friends, and colleagues, who have merely been pushed to the edge of a precipice.”³⁷

The movie's title, *Parasite*, alludes to the Kim family and appears to be a direct allusion to how society's higher classes perceive the lower classes; in this way of thinking, the poor are portrayed as stinky, ugly, and off-putting. Dong-ik explains why he has not fired Ki-taek at the scene where Mr. Park and his wife are on the couch and Ki-taek, his son, and daughter are hidden under the table: “Anyway, even though he always seems about to cross the line, he never does cross it. That's good.”³⁸ He wants a clear line of distinction between himself, the rich, and Ki-taek, the poor.

In a broader sense, the Parks can also be seen as parasites because in a capitalist society, the wealthy do nothing and the people of lower social classes are forced to do all the laborious tasks. The title's dual meaning has been stressed by the director himself: “you can say that rich family, they're also parasites in terms of labour. They can't even wash dishes, they can't drive themselves, so they leech off the poor family's labour.”³⁹ Therefore, the wealthy are parasites in that they wallow in wealth, hold highly regarded positions, and live lives of luxury and comfort while those in the lower class—who may be, and occasionally are—struggle to meet their most basic requirements.

The Kims appear to change their social status from being poor to wealthy in the movie, but this is only possible when they are disguised, and even then, it is not much of a change in and of itself. This brief role-change is a clear reflection of what happens in South Korea (and presumably in all capitalist societies). Social mobility is impossible in the current political climate.⁴⁰ The video suggests that the son's ambitions of learning and becoming wealthy—which, under modern capitalism, are guaranteed if one obtains a degree and gradually lands employment that lead to a better life—will never come true. Instead, the rich will continue to be rich while the poor will remain poor.

Looking for the real Parasite: Conclusion

The film that the filmmaker has been preparing to create his whole career, *Parasite*, feels like it. It's a movie about the terrible, nasty humour of modern life, where some people get to live in the open and others are compelled to live in the dark while everyone is draining the life out of one another. Understanding who the title refers to and why they are the parasite in this situation is the fun part of deciphering *Parasite*.

However, neither Bong nor his writing partner Han Jin-won conform to the haves and have-nots stereotypes. This is not a film about how sad the affluent are. The Parks appear to lead a trouble-free and joyful life, whether this is due to their circumstances or is just a coincidence. Their offence is that they are so comfortable

³⁷ See Alireza Farahbakhsh, Ramtin Ebrahimi, ‘The Social Implications of Metaphor in Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*’ 9 (2021) CINEJ 99.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ John K Kim, ‘*Parasite*: A Film Review on Capitalism’ 10 (2020) Cinesthesia 12.

⁴⁰ Clarisse Loughrey, ‘*Parasite* review: An intricate examination of class conflict’ (*Independent*, 6 February 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/parasite-review-bong-joon-ho-cast-director-oscars-2020-best-picture-a9319656.html>> accessed 12 October 2022.

that they can't actually fathom anyone is hurting. Furthermore, the Kims' poverty does not transform them into saints. The combination of such characters with a surprising narrative makes *Parasite* a classic.

Recent research from the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs has revealed that income disparity has grown in the majority of industrialised nations as well as certain middle-income nations.⁴¹ According to the report, the richest 1% of the population saw an increase in their relative share of worldwide income between 1990 and 2015, while the poorest 40% of the global population saw their incomes fall to less than a fourth of that in all the nations included in the study. Huge disparities in income, generational prospects, infant mortality, exposure to environmental problems, and other factors arise as a result of inequality.⁴² The bottom line is that in all nations, wealth not only produces more wealth but also more prosperity, political power, and opportunities for everybody.

⁴¹ 'UNDESA World Social Report 2020 | DISD' <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-social-report/2020-2.html>> accessed 4 October 2022.

⁴² *ibid.*