WARNING FOR SPOILERS

Downton Abbey and the Origin of Capitalism

CLIPS ARE NOTED ON SCRIPT IN GREEN

IN-PERSON SECTIONS ARE HIGHLIGHTED WITH A COMMENT

SOME 'IN-PERSON' SECTIONS HAVE CLIPS TOO, PRIORITISE THE CLIPS

NOTE I HAVE RECORDED *EVERYTHING* IN VOICEOVER FOR FLOW AND INSURANCE, INCLUDING IN-PERSON SECTIONS

IN-PERSON TO COME 03/06/25

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G35lruYuSAo 2:34-2:39 "if I were to search for logic I should not look for it among the English upper class"

Play intro music for a few secs

Downton Abbey is a show about the Abbey Downton Abbey

Set in the early 20th Century in the North of England, it follows a huge estate which is run by the Crawley family

The patriarch Robert Crawley and his American wife Cora are at the helm

Robert and Cora have three daughters: Mary, Sybil, and Edith, who are looking to get married as all good women should

Maggie Smith plays Robert's mother, the dowager, and she…simply makes the show.

Downton Abbey depicts the life of these British aristocrats at a time of seismic change

The fact that the start of the first episode shows Robert Crawley reading about the Titanic gives you a clue of what's to come

As well as the family themselves, there are countless employees at Downton, many of them faceless, running around in the background to set everything right for the family's countless fancy meals and events.

In the first episode, before we meet the Crawleys or even the senior staff, we see their maids waking up early to get everything started:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eZ_w0kMa9A [1:47-2:04 *knock* "6 o clock…natural"]

This is a signal that Downton is a people's history, not just one focused on the upper classes, and from my judgment the screen time given to the different classes seems roughly equal

I haven't checked this in any way but trust me

The head butler is Mr Carson, a dignified man with a good heart who is quite old-fashioned and takes his job very seriously

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1ntRGNxiEA

(Carson clearly never spent any time on YouTube)

The head maid is Ms Hughes, who is a bit of yin to Carson's yang and softens him up when needs be

The head chef is Ms Patmore, an eternally hard working woman who is very much married to her job

Then there is fan favourite Mr Bates, an old army friend of Robert's who maintains a firm dignity and is basically a model of the man I'd like to become. Bates is actually the first character shown and probably the secret protagonist of the show.

Downton Abbey is basically an extremely well-made soap opera, with relationships between characters taking centre stage. The interpersonal drama even has the feeling of a pantomime sometimes, with the heroes and villains made very clear to the viewer.

END OF CLIP 1

If you're a socially maladjusted man, which is to say, if you're a subscriber of mine, you'd do well to take some lessons from how people in this show read and respond to each other. I'm not joking; the show is basically social intelligence paint-by-numbers.

Having said that, I'm not going to focus on just the characters, but the political and economic environment that they're placed in. That's because this channel is super deep.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R67QOOH_6w& 4:28 "dude can we like…right now?"

The picture painted by Downton Abbey is clearly one of privileged nobility and exploited workers, but it's not as simple as despising the family.

For one, they are generally pretty kind and tend to treat their workers pretty well, all things considered. For instance, when Ms Patmore is overworking herself to the point of losing her vision and messing up, Robert summons her. She thinks she's going to be dismissed, but instead he sends her to a doctor with a nice holiday attached:

[I'm sending you "I'm sending you...square"]

The Crawleys are humanised by tragedy and rarely take it out on those below them. The Abbey is clearly a major fixture of the village and there is a sense of noblesse oblige, a duty of care to those who live in the surrounding area, as well as to their employees.

Robert's sense of duty is particularly strong, if archaic at times. He certainly has sharp edges and is undoubtedly sexist:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8-s8V5BlhM [0:20-0:35 "I am astonished…what ARE you saying?"]

The eldest daughter, Lady Mary, is arguably the protagonist of the series. She overshadows her awkward middle sister Edith, and stands in ladylike contrast to the ever-rebellious youngest sibling, Sybil. Mary is considered the most attractive of the sisters by the standards of the time and behaves in the most ladylike manner…on the surface. Her stalwart desire to maintain Downtown's legacy compels her to carry herself properly and even sing cheesily whenever it is needed. Much of the show follows her journey and who she'll marry.

What's also clear is that Mary looks up to the sharp-tongued Dowager and aims to imitate her with plenty of barbs of her own. But she often falls short and in some cases just comes across as mean. The Dowager is witty and tough, but ultimately…fair. Mary can just be nasty - especially to Edith:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbD5ql1zGTA 0:02-0:14

So Mary learns her lesson as time goes on - sometimes directly from her grandmother. And by the late series she comes up with what I personally think is the best insult in the entire show. A scouse woman is trying to blackmail her - because of course - and starts attacking her class position:

[Working Classes]

This is a perfect insult that deftly avoids any class shaming and justifiably targets a pretty odious woman. The dowager would have been proud of Mary.

So you can't ignore the obvious inequalities within the Abbey: between the family and their servants; between the senior and junior servants; and between genders. However, this isn't a simple good vs evil story either.

We follow the characters at both the top and the bottom of the house as they move through the shifts and lurches of the early 20th Century. Of course – spoilers if you didn't know about the 20th Century – they are about to face pandemic, war, and big economic changes.

If only there were some lessons we could take from them

During WW1, some of the younger men are sent off to fight in the trenches and Sybil, the youngest and most gentle daughter, demonstrates her rebellious passion for justice when she turns parts of Downton into a hospice for wounded soldiers.

As the war ends, it's out of the frying pan and into the fire. With the outbreak of the 1918 Spanish flu, many characters get sick and some even die. Sybil continues in her capacity as a nurse, which leads to a clash of status with the village doctor:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8-s8V5BlhM& "Nurse Crawley..deciding voice *awkward silence*" 5:22-5:29

These global tragedies are not the only things that transform the world over the show. There are also more subtle changes going on in the background. They have to face terrifying new technologies like the toaster:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_o0_Qel9QU "what in heaven's name is it"

There are political changes as Sybil joins the suffragettes:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8-s8V5BlhM [3:37-3:42 "papa I'm sorry…opinions"]

END OF CLIP 2

Like Sybil, Cousin Rose is very much about new things and forces some of them to visit what used to be considered a nightclub in those days:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yy5zspbqpEE [2:10-2:20 "…dante's inferno"]

It's hardly a coincidence that the younger women seem to be the ones pushing these changes, including taking part in jobs traditionally designated for men.

In one of my favourite scenes, the maid Daisy has been getting lessons from a tutor, Sarah Bunting, who comes to dine. The family discuss whether it's appropriate:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgQaoWWlbMg [0:39-0:50 "Ms Bunting…unsettled"]

Sarah Bunting is politically outspoken and doesn't mind challenging Robert, who is against the lessons on the grounds that they may distract Daisy from her work and be a waste of time. They decide to call Daisy up to tell them how it's going, along with Ms Patmore. Daisy seems very happy indeed:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgQaoWWlbMg 2:22-2:27 "I must say…nothing of"

…Ms Patmore assures the family that Daisy is as good as ever at her work. At this point, Robert concedes that he was wrong and the tension over the dinner is lifted:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgQaoWWlbMg 2:51-2:56 "obviously…hear it"

…except that Ms Bunting can't let it go, which leads to this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgQaoWWlbMg 3:02-3:15 "all I've…never come back!"

This exchange feels a bit like a Rorschach test for how people approach politics. Who do you side with? It's clear that Bunting is in the right: maids should be allowed opportunities. Yet it's unclear what point she is really making once Robert concedes; if anything, she's turning people against her cause.

But maybe I'm just too British to tolerate the awkwardness.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgQaoWWlbMg 3:25-3:30 "Edith dear…yes granny"]

What's clear is that despite the wealth, power, and privilege of the family, they too are forced to adapt as the years go by. Downton Abbey is above all the story of having to adapt to change, no matter who you are. It is, in some senses, the story of progress despite adversity.

In summary, Downton Abbey is my favouritest show

But there's more to it than meets the eye

The Economics of Downton Abbey

Like many series, you could argue that Downton Abbey is better at the beginning. I'd say it's fairly consistent but they clearly do run out of interesting plot ideas by the end. It gets repetitive and ends up mostly being about who is going to marry whom. The films are nowhere near as good as the main series. It's saved by the acting, production values, music, scenery, and the investment you have in the characters. The dialogue is just so good that you can't help but watch it all the way through.

(My editor Ben from Canada has a few words on the shots)

At this stage, you may be wondering how I view the show as an *economist*?

For those of you who haven't watched Downton Abbey or haven't finished it, I'd recommend doing so

And if you plan to, you might want to pause and come back because there could be a few teeny-tiny spoilers…

pause

SYBIL DIES, SYBIL DIES, SYBIL DIES

That's right, *I'm* the villain

Downton Abbey's business model represents a blend of modern and traditional economics. The Crawley family clearly occupy an aristocratic position, with all of the cooking, housekeeping, and much of the childcare done by servants in their obscenely massive home. These servants literally live in the basement of the building and wait on the family hand and foot. Even within the servants, there is a clear hierarchy, with butlers at the top and maids at the bottom. It would be easy to mistake this for an old feudal setup, with the lords and ladies occupying their position just 'cos.

Having said that, the employees are all there 'voluntarily' - in that it's possible for them to seek employment elsewhere. They are paid wages and many of them aspire to marry and buy a house, potentially with servants of their own, in the future. In other words, we are talking about a capitalist economy with a labour market where people can earn money and there is *some* mobility. This distinguishes the situation from feudalism, where everyone is fixed in their place by the divine right of kings. b

You can see the progressive effects of this in Series 1, where Gwen - one of Robert's maids - is interviewing for a job as typist, which pays more and offers more progression. Sybil actively encourages her and brings the potential employer to Downton, where they do the interview in the library. She blocks Robert from going in:

[Cannot use library "I cannot use…*sigh and walk away*"]

The interview is successful. Years later, after Sybil is dead, Ygritte from Game of Thrones returns to Downton - but as a guest, clearly having made something of herself. She is furtive but once the family recognise her, they are welcoming:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LJ2hSLYYZI [1:53-2:01 "it seems…I agree, welcome back!"]

Characteristically it is only Thomas, then the head butler, who tries to be mean:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LJ2hSLYYZI 1:24-1:29 "mrs Harding…mr barrow"

and he is directly cautioned by Robert for his efforts:

[Lack of Generosity]

It is Tom Branson who symbolises the paradoxes of this mobility. Starting off as the family's chauffeur, he is an Irish socialist who bonds with Sybil over their radicalism.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 0:14-0:22 "because…the vote"

This leads to them falling in love:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 10:46-10:50 "I've told…changing"

As he and Sybil get together and eventually marry, he moves from working for the family to becoming a part of the family, which entails some typically awkward dinner exchanges:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 2:57-3:01 "is it…changing"

But unlike Ms Bunting, he navigates the situation with Grace:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 5:13-5:28 “these are…to dance”

(Note that Ms Bunting is a late love interest for Tom, but her blowup is what makes him decide against it)

At that point, Branson briefly moves to America with his and Sybil’s daughter. He seems to have two revelations there: firstly, despite Sybil’s death and an uneven history, the Crawley family is his family and he doesn’t want to be away from them. Secondly, he abandons his radical socialist roots:

[American Capitalism] 0:15-0:22 “but I don’t feel…single lifetime”

It’s me, I’m Tom. Although I haven’t married into a rich family yet. If anyone is out there, hit me up.

By the end of the series, Tom is so integrated into the family that he is one of the only people to properly challenge Mary:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 2:17-2:29 “you ruined…coward”

In the end, large parts of Tom’s mobility owe not so much to good, honest work but to the social connections he develops.

So there’s a clear ‘upstairs, downstairs’ theme to Downton Abbey, with the working class and upper class living different lives but both facing changes as the gap lessens. Seemingly mobile individuals like Tom and Gwen and Daisy may end up compromising their values as they see things from the opposing perspective. These dynamics are fairly obvious though; there’s something more subtle in the economics of Downton Abbey than class relations and social mobility.

Downton *is* likely unrealistic because mobility wasn’t the norm and I’m sure plenty of lords and ladies were absolute shits to their workers. But I’m not going to problematise the show as propaganda for the British aristocracy….although it obviously is. It was literally created by Julian Alexander Kitchener-Fellowes or Baron Fellowes Of West Stafford. If you want a video that goes into this more, check out Downton Abbey - Aristo-Trash by Renegade Cut

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VVYoqaz74A&list=WL&index=1

…and if you’re one of the five percent of my subscribers who can read, check out the article Adapting heritage: Class and conservatism in Downton Abbey by Katherine Byrne.

My opinion is in line with a blogger who said:

“Downton is not a history lesson…but it certainly inspires an interest in history”

What surprised *me* about Downton was how accurately it depicts economic history. The most interesting theme of the series begins about halfway through and that’s what I’ll focus on for the rest of the video.

END OF CLIP 3

We learn early on that Robert originally married Cora for her money, ostensibly to keep the estate going through hard times.

[Cora Fortune] 0:10-0:15 “24 years ago…her money!”

Owing to patriarchal rules at the time, he now has charge of that money. But by the third series it seems that Robert has made some bad investments, to the point that the Abbey is now facing bankruptcy:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MnenbsvlXI 1:15-1:20 “are you really telling me that all the money is gone?”

From here, they start to talk about making the land they own more productive to make ends meet. Cousin Matthew pioneers transforming the estate as he realises Downton needs to make more money from all the property they’ve been sitting on:

[Cottage Scene] 0:04-0:11 “quite a few…own devices”

These are big changes. Land which was previously undeveloped or used for subsistence farming has to be put to productive use to generate revenue. In a fiery scene towards the end of this series, Robert is perturbed by the focus on money and what it does to the traditional setup:

[Profit Profit Profit]

Land must now be used for intensive agriculture, to build masses of housing, or by selling it off to those who will make it productive. This also entails making existing denizens of the land sell up:

[Sell up & Tenants “we’re giving farmers…modern world”]

By this stage, you can see that Tom is basically a capitalist! But this is through necessity. Keeping the house running is becoming increasingly difficult because they have to break even financially.

According to the internet, the Crawley family own over 1,000 acres of parkland, much of which was empty at the onset of the show. Yet by the end of the show, they have converted or gotten rid of much of this. They have also cut down on their workforce and on their extravagant parties. In other words, it seems that the demands of the modern economy are forcing *them* to change as much as anyone else:

[Nothing has changed]

We won’t shed a tear for the Crawleys as they are still living luxurious, leisure-filled lifestyles even as the world changes around them. What’s important is the process depicted in Downton Abbey and how it relates to the birth of capitalism, the economic system we all know and love. One theory was pioneered by the economic historian Ellen Meiksins-Wood in her book The Origin of Capitalism. For Wood, the practice of making land more productive due to economic necessity is central to how capitalism came about. In fact, Downton Abbey’s surface appearance of feudalism - lords and ladies with butlers and servants - which nevertheless hides a capitalist underbelly is a perfect representation of how the former gave birth to the latter.

When most people think of capitalism, they might think of a few things.

One is industry: most people think of the smoke-filled factories of the industrial revolution. This is generally thought to have happened because of new technologies like steam, rail, and electricity. These allowed mass production and transportation of commodities to take place. The Spinning Jenny allowed people to weave multiple spools of cloth at a time, instead of just one or two.

A second thing people might think of is commerce: people have traded and sold things throughout civilisation as we know it, haggling in street markets and travelling long distances to fetch exotic goods they can't get in their own country. In this view, capitalism is just traditional trade and business on steroids, with people specialising more and selling more to bigger markets. You start with Marco Polo's Silk Road and gradually, albeit sporadically, you get to the modern corporation.

A third is state power. Generally favoured by the left, this argues that traditional ways of life were destroyed to make way for private property. Communities used to live off the land and craft clothes and build houses themselves - they were self-sufficient. As modern governments emerged with a monopoly over coercion, they expanded both at home and abroad, dispossessing peasants and indigenous groups. The ruling class deliberately created a mass of people who had to work for wages and make profit for them. Through violence, greed and power, capitalism was born.

All of these explanations are factual. They're relevant to how capitalism works and to the timeline of how it developed. But they all suffer from the same fundamental problem: they can't escape the assumption that capitalism will happen if people are given half a chance. Whether the catalyst is new technologies, a new trade route, or an all-powerful state, they all assume that at one time or another, people realised they could behave like capitalists…and then did. In the words of Meiksins-Wood, they all rely on the *opportunity* to behave like capitalists.

If that's true, human history is just a story of everyone waiting in the wings until the conditions are right to become capitalist. It is the history of removing obstacles for capitalism to flourish. But is that really the case? In Downton Abbey, they are *compelled* to behave like capitalists, which may offer us the key to unlocking this mystery.

I'm going to rely quite heavily on Meiksins-Wood in this video, and some might criticise her work or criticise me for using one source too much. While that's entirely fair, I want to highlight why I've done it. Firstly, she is brilliant and deserves her own video - prove me wrong. Secondly, I want the video to be shorter than usual so I'm not reviewing every part of this debate, which would take seve in n hours at least. Third, the important thing is less whether you believe exactly what she says and more to encourage critical thinking about how capitalism emerged.

Needless to say, that is a question which has confused the best and brightest historians for a long time.

But it has also confused some other people.

END OF CLIP 4

"What Capitalism" – YouTubers

Everyone on YouTube is talking about capitalism, but most people have trouble properly defining it, explaining how it works, and where it came from. And I'm not talking about reading out the first definition from Google. You want to use a search engine that makes up meanings for fake sayings?

We need a historically grounded definition that shows how our economic system emerged and what makes it tick. To show you the opposite of that, here is the physicist Sabine Hossenfelder trying her hand at economics for some reason:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRPHp2EjNR8& [intro triangulation nonsense]

(I had to rewatch her video for this and now you will share my pain.)

What's valuable about Sabine's video is that it falls into all of the classic traps for modern observers trying to explain how a system they live under emerged. She seems to assume that people, when left alone, will gradually develop capitalism somehow. Sabine posits that, for whatever reason, some people may find themselves with an excess of certain goods like apples. They want to do something like make apple juice, so they need a juice press.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRPHp2EjNR8& 3:30 "you would like…sucks" 3:40

They then borrow the money from someone with a lot of money and they're away!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRPHp2EjNR8& 3:52 "Sue sees…a new business" 4:21

Clearly, there are quite a few things wrong here. Firstly, a capitalist isn't traditionally thought to be an investor. Maybe you could say investors are types of capitalist, but the obvious capitalist in Sabine's example is the juicemaker: the person producing things for sale. Secondly, how is Sue able to get so much money from chickens but 'you' aren't able to get it from selling apples directly? Thirdly, where did 'you' get the capacity to mass produce apples if you can't even afford a juice presser?

Let's ignore these quibbles though because Sabine's analysis suffers from a more fundamental flaw: she is assuming the very thing she is supposed to explain. When discussing how a capitalist business emerges she assumes that someone with a lot of apples will just decide to borrow money, invest in a juicemaker, and sell the juice on the market. In other words, the reason capitalism emerges is because, given half a chance, people will start producing something to make money…or, behaving like capitalists.

There's an obvious counterpoint to this: if being a capitalist is such a natural inclination for humanity, how come capitalism has only existed for a few hundred years? Most historians place the emergence of capitalism as happening in England in the 18th Century onwards. There may be precursors to this in earlier human behaviour, but none of these resulted in the industrial revolution and huge economic growth. There has to be something special about England during this period which you can't get from these toy examples. According to explanations like Sabine's, for hundreds of thousands of years humans didn't create modern capitalism even though anyone left alone with a few apples will. Yet somehow the Garden of Eden was never incorporated.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRPHp2EjNR8& 4:35-4:44 "while money….recent innovation"

Surprising, you say? Surprising that the story you just made up fails to explain human history, an academic discipline where controversies between experts over basic facts rage on for centuries? Physicist spotted!

It's not just Sabine Hossenfelder. There's a channel called Libertarian Scot who once made an - ahem - 'response' video to my own previous video on capitalism. I know it's bad form to critique smaller channels but believe me, this guy deserves it https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ9OjCWFxjA& 16:46-16:54 “how convenient..you are”

Me looking in mirror

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ9OjCWFxjA& 16:59-17:03 “and you always…own agenda”

*Me striking a black felt tip over a history book * “Nope, didn’t happen”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ9OjCWFxjA& 23:46-23:51 “he calls himself…an intellectual”

Hey! That’s Dr Intellectual to you!

Glaswegian accent Anyway, our mate Scotty thinks that capitalism emerged just ‘cos people were free to do so

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ9OjCWFxjA& 17:05-17:14 “because the reality is…free to do so”

This is a stronger version of the same argument, because in this view there were so many restrictions in previous systems that people couldn’t trade, specialise, make profit, etcetera. For example, many civilisations had formal and informal laws against usury for a long time, preventing the lending of money with interest and therefore preventing many potential business ventures. Meiksins-Wood is more than familiar with versions of this argument:

“Capitalism seems always to be there, somewhere; and it only needs to be released from its chains - for instance, from the fetters of feudalism - to be allowed to grow and mature. Typically, these fetters are political: the parasitic powers of lordship, or the restrictions of an autocratic state. Sometimes they are cultural or ideological: perhaps the wrong religion. These constraints confine the "free movement of 'economic' actors, the free expression of economic rationality. The 'economic' in these formulations is identified with exchange or markets; and it is here that we can detect the assumption that the seeds of capitalism are contained in the most primitive acts of exchange, in any form of trade or market activity.”

The main problem for this is the existence of commercial centres that predate capitalism as we know it, yet which were not associated with the kind of economic growth we have seen over the course of capitalism. Commercial centres like Florence during the 14th and 15th Centuries saw widespread free trade and high standards of living - especially for the wealthy - but they didn’t take off like in the English countryside. Similarly, there were many wealthy peasants throughout history who were not much restricted in their ability to trade, yet never really became capitalists as we know them. Eventually, these commercial centres all gave way to internal and external forces - most notably, all would eventually be consumed by capitalism once it did emerge. More on that later.

Scotty can’t square his view that capitalism is natural with his view that capitalism leads to increased material living standards. Because if behaving like a capitalist is so natural, living standards should have taken off in countless times and places before England a few hundred years ago.

Ahh Glasgow, you produce Limmy, Kevin Bridges, Celtic football club, battered mars bars, this view! Capitalism!? …then this guy? Come on, what happened?

As one final example, let’s take a look at another YouTuber…Unlearning Economics?

Dumb name

He begins by detailing the division of labour: how workers splitting into different tasks increases productivity. This is undoubtedly key to the description of capitalist enterprise:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCjmMef8BrE& 4:42-4:51 “when workers…they need”

He deftly - dare I say handsomely - avoids the trap of just assuming that specialisation and capitalism are one and the same:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCjmMef8BrE& 6:04-6:13 “but the…before capitalism”

The video also acknowledges that capitalism isn’t a natural evolution and that the interests of capitalists can affect the organisation of the economy:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCjmMef8BrE& 9:00-9:23 “for this reason…total surplus”

Plus, the fundamental M - C - M’ circuit identified by Karl Marx, depicting reinvestment of profits which leads to expansion:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCjmMef8BrE& 9:34-9:49 “this is what…whole process again”

Yet despite some decent descriptions of capitalism, Unlearning Economics runs into the same problem as the others. Whether capitalists have a positive or a negative effect, at what point do they start behaving like capitalists? Yes, the division of labour may not just have been natural to people, but why was capitalism? He answers ‘what’, but not ‘why’.

In the end, everything he says is subject to the same objection as before: if people start behaving like capitalists given half an opportunity, including forcing the division of labour, then why is capitalism such a recent phenomenon?

Regardless of ideological affiliation, these histories of capitalism have something in common. Meiksins-Wood calls them question-begging: having a premise that is virtually indistinguishable from the conclusion. We’re so used to capitalism that, at some point, almost any explanation devolves into “…and then people just started capitalising.” It’s assumed that people have the tendency to trade in markets, to make money, to compete, to hire workers for wages, to invest – all the things we associate with capitalism. From there, the history just becomes an exercise in establishing when all the artificial barriers to it were removed. Naturally, you see this tendency a lot among those highly favourable to capitalism, who are keen to emphasise that it is a natural and desirable end point for humanity. However, you also see it among more critical authors who still struggle to escape the same idea despite their proclivities.

END OF CLIP 5

Wood considers all of these explanations to be quantitative expansions: more of the same. More technology, more trade, more wealth. Yet capitalism was a qualitative expansion: something different. It depends not on the opportunity to become an entrepreneur - which is ever-present throughout human history - but on changes in social relations leading to the *need* to make money to survive:

“Capitalism differs from other social forms because producers depend on the market for access to the means of production (unlike, for instance, peasants, who remain in direct, non-market possession of land); while appropriators cannot rely on 'extra-economic' powers

of appropriation by means of direct coercion - such as the military, political, and judicial powers that enable feudal lords to extract surplus labour from peasants but must depend on the purely 'economic' mechanisms of the market. This distinct system of market dependence means that the requirements of competition and profit-maximization are the fundamental rules of life."

Instead of starting too early with trade in 5,000 BC, or too late with the industrial revolution in the 18th Century, Wood reckons that we should start in 1066, with the Norman invasion of England by William the Conqueror.

Blame the French

Unlike the YouTubers from before, I do my research. From reading The Origin of Capitalism, this book of crucial facts about Britain which is basically for children, and playing Age of Empires 4, my understanding is that William the Conqueror was French. This made him very angry at the English and he decided to take our country over to force us to cook acceptable food. While he failed at the latter, he succeeded at the former, and he set up a political system for managing the land which endures to this day.

[The Gentlemen British Aristocracy] 0:00-0:13 "do you know…stole it"

William the Conqueror, known by his mates as Will, inherited England a feudal system and he left it a feudal system. There were lords and peasants and the peasants worked on the fields while the lords appropriated their output. The lords lived well while the peasants lived badly, but the lords then paid tribute to the monarchy, who lived in luxury. Will wanted to make sure that the system he designed kept these hierarchies in place so his descendants would own the country forever. Downton Abbey's aristocrats would likely have been able to trace their heritage back to the Normans 900 years earlier, so he was clearly successful in this respect. He didn't deliberately or immediately create capitalism as we know it; he reinforced the monarchy and feudalism.

[The Gentlemen British Aristocracy] 0:13-0:16 "William the Conqueror…Al Capone"

Will may have inadvertently sowed the seeds for the demise of the aristocrats, though, through a process he simply couldn't have foreseen. Some strange features of the country he created would, very gradually, emerge into something like the economy we see today. This would subject the aristocracy to the kind of pressures we saw in Downton Abbey. Having to make money would gradually become a requirement of English life for rich and poor alike.

The government post-1066 was uniquely centralized by standards at the time. Previously, England had been split into several kingdoms. There was a King of England but there was also a king of Northumbria, of East Anglia, of Mercia, and of other made-up sounding places. This meant a decentralized system where political decisions were made by the regional kings. The former King of England had power, but was more of an overseer than anything. The Normans instead designed the English crown as an ultimate authority which would enforce the centrally determined law.

"In the eleventh century (if not before), when the Norman ruling class established itself on the island as a fairly cohesive military and political entity, England already became more unified than most countries. In the sixteenth century, England went a long way toward eliminating the fragmentation of the state, the 'parcellized sovereignty', inherited from feudalism. The autonomous powers held by lords, municipal bodies, and other corporate

entities in other European states were, in England, increasingly concentrated in the central state."

This was the birth of the common law tradition, which would develop over the next few centuries. Ultimate authority resides with the central state but the state is not all-powerful. It doesn't enforce things by fiat; it mostly intervenes to settle disputes between different parties - like lords and peasants. They are supposed to decide on the terms of their agreement and, subject to some reasonable precedents, those terms are enforced by the state in case of conflict.

Wood ties these features of English feudalism to capitalism as we know it. Instead of an ever-present tendency to "truck, barter, and trade" as the famous economist Adam Smith wrongly put it, she centres economic compulsion. It was not that a growing merchant class saw new opportunities, or that new inventions led to industrialisation, nor was it that the wealth stolen via imperialism allowed the elites to invest. Instead, it was something more mundane: a system emerged where people had to earn money to survive:

"In England, an exceptionally large proportion of land was owned by landlords and worked by tenants whose conditions of tenure increasingly took the form of economic leases, with rents not fixed by law or custom but responsive to market conditions. It could even be said that there existed a market in leases. The conditions of tenure were such that growing numbers of tenants were subjected to market imperatives - not the opportunity to produce for the market and to grow from petty producers into capitalists but the need to specialize for the market and to produce competitively - simply in order to guarantee access to the means of subsistence and to the land itself. This was in contrast to peasants, who, because they remained in direct possession of their means of subsistence, were shielded from competition and the compulsions of the market, even if they engaged in market exchange."

Previously, survival had meant finding your own food – whether through farming or hunter-gathering – else appropriating it from those who had. The system put in place by William the Conqueror inadvertently changed this over time. Because of the centralized system with the rule of law as we understand it today, both landlords and peasants had to abide by their initial agreement. This was akin to a modern contract: you pay me so and so rent for a year and the only reason the state would intervene would be if you hadn't paid the agreed amount. The lords had power and wealth, but their control was limited by the terms of a preset contract.

END OF CLIP 6

The easiest way to understand this system is to contrast it with other forms of feudalism at the time. The French system was much less centralised and each lord was judge, jury, and executioner. If the French lords wanted to up their order of grain, they'd wade onto the land themselves and say "me envoyer plus grain". The lords possessed direct political authority which meant they could squeeze the peasants if they needed more.

In contrast, if the English landlords wanted more grain, they'd pressure tenants to be more productive so they could raise the rent over time, but they were not licensed by the central government to squeeze them directly as French landlords were. French landlords made a profit by upping their overt exploitation of their peasants; English landlords made a profit by upping the productivity of their tenants.

[Market Explanation clip]

Much like a job today, peasants began to rely on their income from the market to survive. In this sense, the landlords' and the tenants' interests seemed to coincide, both of them aligning to push higher agricultural productivity, higher incomes and higher rents.

There were also material reasons that this system took hold in England. Thanks to the Romans, there was an extensive network of roads and water transport which facilitated centralisation. The lords also owned larger tracts of land than in the rest of Europe. A centralised state would have found it difficult to enforce countless, tiny disputes between lords and peasants in a more decentralised system as in France. In addition, these large tracts of land allowed lords to benefit from economies of scale, facilitating further investment.

As Wood acknowledges, it's impossible to pinpoint an exact moment where this system emerged and capitalism was born. Was it when King Harold got an arrow in the eye in 1066? Was it some court's interpretation of a rental contract in 1251 which set a precedent? Was it the glorious revolution of 1688? Or King Henry VIII's decision to split the church? Was it when we started getting Greggs drive-thrus?

We can't know exactly what caused the birth of capitalism but what we can see by the 16th Century is an increasing emergence of surveyors appealing to market values and arguing that some peasants were underpaying. The surveyors spoke of 'the annual value beyond rent' or 'value above the oulde rent'. As market value went up, more was demanded of the tenant, so they (or another tenant) produced more, the land became more valuable, and the cycle continued to push economic output up, seemingly without limit. Though we must remember that in reality, this was a slow process drawn out over centuries.

In Bridgerton, set 100 years earlier than Downton Abbey, the wealthy family are also talking about the productivity of their farmland:

[Bridgerton Clip] 0:13-0:20 "The fields…nutrients"

They certainly don't seem to be as concerned about it as the Downton lot; money is never a problem in Bridgerton. Which may just be a symptom of the fact that Bridgerton is set earlier, before capitalism truly destabilised the aristocracy. Or it may be a symptom of the fact that Bridgerton is fundamentally a worse and more shallow show.

In The Gentlemen, set 100 years after Downton, aristocrats are forced to turn to organised crime to make ends meet. Some are losing their estates entirely to gangsters and facing bankruptcy.

Kaya Scalediro is excellent as Suzie Glass, though that's nothing new

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYIJZ-0NZXM 0:18-0:22 "Hi Effy..fine!"

And in the 2019 film the Gentlemen, something similar is happening and the gangsters helping the aristocrats grow weed include…Lady Mary.

Okay, this is getting confusing.

The important takeaway is that for Meiksins-Wood, capitalism was not born in grand cities, huge empires, or through exploring new lands. It was born in the English countryside. And it was not born because people decided to be capitalist after they were released from arbitrary restrictions. It was born because the increasing presence of the market meant people had to work for money to survive.

END OF CLIP 7

Then What Happened?

One way of looking at this whole process was the birth of the economy as a separate sphere. In the past, political and economic authority were one and the same. From the Sultans in the earliest middle eastern empires to the Emperors of Rome, the ability to set and enforce the law meant the ability to extract resources from those below you. There was no split between economic and political power. French feudal lords were the bosses, the rulers, and the wealthy - all in one. Although there is obvious overlap between those categories today, there is also a separation. Many bosses are not rich; many wealthy people have little formal power; and politicians cannot wade into your workplace to tell you what to do.

With the advent of what Wood calls agrarian capitalism, the amount of rent tenants paid was not determined by the whims of the lord, but by the whims of the market. The expansion of market forces started with land and by extension, food, our most basic need. Those who could use the land most productively for the most profitable uses would have an advantage. This meant landlords and tenants who worked harder, invested in technologies, and used superior techniques.

[Farm Out] 0:00-0:07 “...all settled”

An ethic of ‘improvement’ gradually permeated not just the economy but broader ideologies. One of the most prominent intellectuals to embrace this idea was John Locke, who fixated on the idea of making land profitable for sale on the market. Whether the traditional arrangements and rights of English peasants or those of Indigenous Americans, Locke was convinced that practices which didn’t assimilate the land and bring it into productive use were morally worthless. (This may or may not have been related to the fact that Locke oversaw and personally benefited from this process.)

You can see the ethic of improvement in Downton Abbey:

[Cottage Clip] 0:28-0:33 “it would be cheaper...should be worked”

as Wood details, it’s also evidenced from crimes like colonial Ireland, where the land was forcibly taken for commercial use by the English, leading to famine:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwE5t8uYn8Q 3:56-4:02 “is keeping…*Carson drops glass*”

This raises the question: how did this agrarian form of capitalism evolve from the 16th Century to now? How did we go from farm to factory?

[Workers Leaving] “why have they left…the hours”

Meiksins-Wood details the ingredients for this chain of events. First, increased productivity of land reduced the number of people required to feed the population. This freed up everyone else to produce other things. By 1850, the urban population of England and Wales was about 40 per cent but France's was still only 14 per cent. England was also a net exporter of grain. So we were producing a lot more with far fewer people - we were more productive than the French. And now…we are more productive than the French.

Second, as markets took over food production, non-farmers were compelled to work for money to feed themselves. They could not grow their own food which meant they had to earn ‘n’ burn. They’d be looking for some work, any work, which is what led to the first truly landless souls existing in poverty and begging for employment.

The third is that those who earned enough had the buying power to get more than just food, giving rise to industries in other necessities. Most famous of these was the cotton cloth industry, which symbolises early industrial capitalism in England:

“Without a productive agricultural sector that could sustain a large non-agricultural workforce, the world's first industrial capitalism would have been unlikely to emerge. Without England's agrarian capitalism, there would have been no dispossessed mass obliged to sell its labour for a wage. Without that dispossessed non-agrarian workforce, there would have been no mass consumer market for the cheap everyday goods - such as food and textiles - that drove the process of industrialization in England.”

This gave rise to what Karl Polanyi called the Great Transformation. As everything was brought into the market, we moved from having markets to being a market society. Of particular note for Polanyi were land, labour, and money, which had not previously been so widely traded.

Previously, none of these three things were traded on any notable scale. Land was largely inherited: the lord would not dream of selling his land, which was a symbol of his status and wealth, but would instead pass it down to his heirs. Peasants themselves would likely be tied to one lord and therefore one land for generations. Yet as market value took over as a measure of the value of land, it was increasingly not only acceptable but necessary to sell land on the open market.

As peasants (and even lords) were increasingly dispossessed by land changing hands, they began to seek employment in something resembling a modern job. No longer able to subsist by growing their own food, they were now dependent on markets for income. What Polanyi called a ‘market for labour’ began to develop, with people being paid to work so that they could afford what they needed to survive. The idea of much of the population being compelled to sell their labour was actually quite novel: working for wages was previously rare, confined to temporary arrangements like master– apprentice relationships. Think of a blacksmith: the apprentice would work for a wage when young to accrue the skills needed to become a blacksmith once they were older. Over a period of centuries, working for wages gradually moved from the exception to the rule for most of the population for most of their lives, and it remains so today.

Polanyi’s other crucial commodity, money, naturally rose in prominence at the same time as land and labour because it was the only way of facilitating such exchanges. Being paid at one time and place, then being able to use that same payment to buy something completely different, at some unknown point in the future, required a consistent token which kept its value. Money had been used in earlier markets, but it was nowhere near as widespread. With the rise of the market economy, money has become a universal ‘measuring stick’, used to value commodities from food to fashion, and it continues to reach new corners of our lives today.

These days, virtually everything is for sale. These days, virtually everything is subject to the ethic of improvement.

https://youtu.be/Tm9vx8yzVIo?si=afkgDZNatcZh7bkk&t=888 [just play some of the hustle culture shit]

Of course, Downton Abbey isn't real.

(You will never be friends with them all).

Yet it is surprisingly historically grounded in its depiction of how the British aristocracy adapted to modernity - or didn't. As in Downton, they actually thrived on agrarian capitalism for a long time:

"The remains of a classic military aristocracy had long been replaced by the comforts and ornaments of the country gentleman, the 'territorial aristocrat' living on the rents of capitalist tenants, who truly came into his own in the eighteenth century."

It was the latter industrial forms of capitalism which led to the demise of the aristocracy. By the 20th Century, when Downton begins, the aristocracy's traditional investments in farmland, real estate, and transport were failing to keep up. Between 1809 and 1879, 88% of Britain's millionaires were aristocratic landlords, but this dropped to 33% between 1880 and 1914.

Don't forget that the first episode shows that Robert married Cora, an American industrial heiress, for money! There is solid research showing that this was a widespread phenomenon!

Downton Abbey itself does survive, but it is an exception due to its size and the fact that they modernise just enough to keep going and the fact that the show had to be extended for further episodes.

However, things do get harder as the show progresses. In the second film they allow a film to be made in the Abbey so that they can make much-needed repairs, showing just how commercial it has become:

[Attic Leaks]

…in the upcoming grand finale, there are even hints they may be leaving it behind altogether…

https://youtu.be/hFzH1AWxgIM?si=WnNqv0myPkmdDsMr&t=68

Of course, this process of marketisation didn't end in England. The effects of capitalism spread across the globe:

"Capitalism had emerged first in one country. After that, it could never emerge again in the same way. Every extension of its laws of motion changed the conditions of development thereafter, and every local context shaped the processes of change."

Following the growth of the UK, other European powers realised that they needed to industrialise to keep up. This was partially because they recognised that the increased wealth of England gave it more military power. However, rather than follow in the footsteps of William the Conqueror and redesign their entire political systems to centre them around markets, they opted for forms of industrialisation driven by government:

"from the late eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth, Britain's major European rivals were under pressure to develop their economies in ways that could meet this new

challenge. The state itself became a major player. This was true most notably in Germany, with its state-led industrialization, which in the first instance was undoubtedly driven more by older geopolitical and military considerations than by capitalist motivations"

The distinction between English forms of capitalism and European ones persists to this day. In France and Germany, the economy is considered to be more intertwined with the state; in the UK and USA, it is considered a separate entity. These d ifferences have deep political and legal roots which absolutely fascinate me but are beyond the scope of a video ostensibly about a British period drama. That's why I'll wrap up now.

END OF CLIP 8

Capitalism: The Definitive Answer

What's the verdict on capitalism?

Meiksins-Wood is an avowed Marxist who has another book called Capitalism Against Democracy, so it's clear where her sympathies lie. Yet even she states that the emergence of capitalism in the English countryside:

"...set in train a new historical dynamic: an unprecedented rupture with old Malthusian cycles, a process of self-sustaining development, new competitive pressures that had their own effects on the need to increase productivity, reconfiguring and further concentrating landholding, and so on."

This mixture of reverence and disgust, awe and contempt, a call for socialist revolution but only after the capitalist revolution, is common among those who study our economic system in depth, including the man whose footsteps Wood follows in.

Downton Abbey shows that capitalism's development subjects everyone to the pressures of the market, forcing the world to become more productive to keep up with itself. Many traditional social ties are thrown out of whack and those tenants who depended on the estate may now find themselves turfed out due to market pressures. Downton Abbey depicts many aristocrats losing their status, plus the tenants and workers who suffer.

At the same time, the expanding economy creates opportunities for the workers to move around and make something of themselves. It increases material standards of living and gives rise to new technologies. It is accompanied by big social and political shifts which may have been facilitated by this relentless economic change. There is an optimism to Downton Abbey, which I think is epitomised by this scene of Thomas Barrow and his 'friend' in the 2019 film:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XA-rgmGS6wk 2:25-2:30 "will they ever…could fly?"

So: is capitalism an impressive beast which has massively raised our material standard of living, destroyed old hierarchies, connected the world, and given us all freedom before the market?

Or an inhumane monster which has turned us into machines, destroyed our environment, reinforced systemic oppression and subjected us to the whims of a vicious market beyond our control?

The intellectually honest answer is that it's both. Capitalism has done all of these things and more. At the very least, capitalism presents an opportunity for us to progress as a world as we are released from the traps of nature and old prejudices.

While that may be the honest answer… it's not entirely satisfying, is it? You didn't watch this video to hear 'in conclusion, capitalism is a land of contrasts'. So I'll leave you with a few questions that *I* think are important for answering whether we want capitalism. I say *I* think - like everything in this video, most of them are stolen from Ellen Meiksins-Wood:

1. To what extent can we distinguish between capitalism and commerce? Is commerce potentially capitalism with the teeth taken out? Medieval Italy, the Islamic Empires, and the Qing Empire had all boasted impressive levels of commerce that predated the market economy. Would we have done better if Florence had taken over the world? Having visited Florence, my answer is yes. But seriously, these were highly elitist ventures that didn't lead to widely shared growth, so maybe not. On a related note, Jairus Banaji has argued that capitalism and mass production *were* nascent in places like Florence, which blurs the clean line Wood draws between them and English capitalism.
2. If William the Conqueror, known to his friends as Will, accidentally created a market economy just by having centrally enforced rental contracts, why did it not happen elsewhere before? Capitalism may not be universal but the conditions in England don't seem *that* out there, right? Some economic historians argue that the Roman Empire was a market economy…but if that was the case why did Rome not take off? Some economic historians argue that it was actually the rise of science that allowed progress to take place over the past few hundred years, which again raises the question of whether we need capitalism. Meiksins-Wood makes a similar point about The Enlightenment predating capitalism and being based on non-capitalist values.
3. To what extent is the rise of fossil fuels and related inventions responsible for our growth in material living standards, versus the expansion created by the market economy? If it's the former, then isn't one of capitalism's main claims to fame - that it increased material living standards - largely specious? Once more, if this is true then maybe we need to think more about how we harness energy and less about how we harness capitalism. This is essentially the argument of fossil capital by Andreas Malm. In fact, he argues that fossil fuels and capitalism as we know it are so inseparable that a move to renewables will require a new system entirely.
4. What is the relationship between capitalism and sexism? Meiksins-Wood and Downton Abbey are both well aware of historical sexism, but they do not centre it as necessary. When Ms Hughes softens up and supports Mr Carson; Daisy is discouraged from education; or all three daughters are required to marry, are these a necessary part of the system or historically contingent? Authors such as Silvia Federici have argued that the brutal subjugation of women, most viscerally through the witch trials, was necessary to force women into this supportive role. On the other hand, Downton does depict the gradual lifting of these barriers and contemporary capitalism has far less strict expectations of women.
5. What is the relationship between capitalism and racism? Downton Abbey is quite good at depicting patriarchy and the class system, but colonialism is almost absent - they mention the colonies at one point but they're barely explored. This mirrors a debate that Meiksins-Wood had with Adolph Reed about whether or not the emergence of capitalism required racial divisions to really take off. Neither dispute

that there’s a relationship between the two - Chapter 7 of the Origins of Capitalism goes into detail on how the process that began in the English countryside spread violently across the world - but Wood believes that -quote - “capitalism is conceivable without racial divisions”, whereas Reed believes that such a statement is useless given the historical reality. Personally, this strikes me as a super academic debate that’s about nothing - in practice, capitalism has been racist, but conceptually Meiksins-Wood’s definition of it as survival before the market doesn’t have to mention race.

Answering each one of these questions would require a lifetime of research. Both social scientific and natural scientific knowledge. A solid grasp of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Careful philosophical reasoning used in the service of facts. Thorough understandings of periods ranging from 0BC to the 16th Century Netherlands to the USA today.

Answering these questions would entail watching shows like Medici and Rome and Landman, which are each many seasons long. I can’t do that on my own, do you know how many series I’m watching at the moment? I don’t even like most of them but my brain tells me I do because I’ve invested so much time into them. Plus, I can maybe get YouTube videos out of them, so I am economically compelled to watch them to make a living. Help, help me escape this trap by signing up to my Patreon and breaking my ties to the algorithmic market that is YouTube. Help me escape capitalism.

(It must be bad if I’m saying that, right?)

END OF CLIP 9