

The Common Downfall of the Mighty: Abuses of Cheap Labor

Class warfare is and has been ubiquitous in society, and is most evident in communities that have developed some form of advanced government. Labor is imperative for a society to be able to build noticeable status and its laborers are easily exploited by those forms of government, leading to the issue of class warfare. Despite the disparity between the two populations of peasants in feudal France and the Mexican-American working class during the 1950's, both groups faced exploitation through labor as well as explicit forms of classism, through increasing trends of developing consumer culture. It is conspicuous that the corrupt system of governments in place at both times manifested a culture of discrimination based on class, making it difficult for the society to develop its full financial potential.

The society of 13th-century France was divided into general groups consisting of peasants, also known as villeins, nobles, and the aristocracy. Although the French peasants were at the bottom of the feudal system, the rest of France largely depended upon them “largely as a source of income” not only for the lords but the expansion of France as a notable nation.¹ Because of this enormous dependence upon the peasants, the higher end of the social hierarchy struggled to find a balance between extracting the most out of the peasants regarding labor and keeping them content so that they would not rebel. Similarities can be accentuated within the Mexican-American working class communities of the 1950s, specifically, those in the agri-business division who worked long hours without adequate pay underneath a US government program intended to aid them. Both groups of laborers, peasants, and Mexican-Americans, primarily tended to crops and performed intense

¹ Williams Davis, *Life on a Medieval Barony* (New York: Biblio & Tannen Publishers, 1990), 257.

hands-on labor. Although America in the 1950's still had three main social classes similar to feudal France, the upper, middle and lower class, America had a strong cultural belief in socio-economic mobility in a society that favored capitalism rather than feudal France representing a monarchy. In spite of 1950's America's opportunity for individuals to gain social mobility, Mexican-Americans "suffered from [social] discrimination" partially due to their socio-economic status similar to the French peasants of the 13th-century.² In short, despite the difference within the period, both groups faced similar discrimination against their socio-economic standing due to a culture that promoted classism as well as not providing those laborers a just way towards social mobility.

Although the ability to work was beneficial for the peasants since they received some amount of pay, they were forced to give up their pay due to "imposts and numerous fees", that were disproportional to their income in the first place, that they owed to their lord that owned the land.³ French peasants had to work arduous hours that called for harsh hands-on labor such as grinding up flour, pressing grapes, driving sheep "into the lord's sheepfold every night."⁴ Since peasants did not own a lot of property in the first place, all of these chores needed to be done with their lord's property which required that the peasant pays the lord fees for using the lord's materials. Having to pay to work for the lord counteracts the point of working to gain social mobility. This corrupt system placed the peasant at a socio-economic disadvantage; the peasant did not have any earnings to support themselves or to be able to be publically respected. Many Mexican immigrants who came to the US and gained citizenship looked towards chances that would allow them to improve their financial disadvantages. The *Bracero Program* "permitted a designated number of Mexicans to... work

² "Discrimination Against Hispanics, Latinos, and Mexican Americans, and the Need for more Civil Rights Lawyers in California," *HG.org Legal Resources*, Accessed April 05, 2016, <https://www.hg.org/article.asp?id=6051>.

³ Williams Davis, *Life on a Medieval Barony* (New York: Biblio & Tannen Publishers, 1990), 258.

⁴ *Ibid* 3.

[in the US] for a...period of time”, its intentions were to guarantee fundamental human rights towards Mexican laborers by setting guidelines for the US to adhere to.⁵ This program is the basis of exploitation that Mexican-Americans faced due to making labor exploitations standard through exposure to the American public, thus normalizing the culture of classism and abuse towards the working poor. Numerous Mexican-Americans, adults, and children, performed their work in fields which lead to being susceptible to heat stroke.⁶ Despite their onerous work, a great deal of Mexican-American individuals received only \$0.25 or \$0.30 an hour where the standard minimum wage at the time was \$0.75.⁷ The reality of the *Bracero* Program is told by Kitty Calavita, a professor who has examined the interplay between society, immigration and inequality, highlights the vicious cycle of Mexican-American farmworkers being continually in debt to their authority figures, paralleling the situation of the French peasants’ inability to escape peasantry.⁸ The two groups’ circumstances of being exploited for cheap or free labor suggest that there is a corrupt system of governing that provided little to no basic human rights to their laborers. Many of these labor abuses are rendered as societal and cultural norms, and these forms of government favor those that can spend capital to demonstrate their wealth and represent their high status in society as later shown through the middle class of both feudal France and during the consumer boom of 1950’s America.⁹

⁵ Richard Goodman, “The Politics of Agricultural Labor: Braceros And Farmworkers in the 1950s,” *Onda Latina*, https://www.laits.utexas.edu/onda_latina/program?sernum=000534559&term=.

⁶ Baldemar Velasquez, “Oppression and Farmworker Health in a Global Economy,” <https://www.panna.org/sites/default/files/imported/files/OppressionandFarmworkerHealthGlobalEconomy.pdf>.

⁷ “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009,” United States Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm>.

⁸ Kitty Calavita, “Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S.,” (New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2010), 4.

⁹ Jovan Hernandez, “Development and psychometric validation of the Perceived Classism Scales: measures of perceived social class discrimination,” PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), University of Iowa, 2013, 17 <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4895&context=etd>.

Thus portraying these individuals as socially inconsequential and the rest of society would come to create mostly negative stereotypes about poverty.¹⁰

The collective ideas and stereotypes regarding the distaste for the peasants or the Mexican-American farmworkers were due to the corrupt governments constructed to favor the more financially privileged of the hierarchy. This culture of discrimination along with the exploitation of vulnerable individuals creates a firm basis for class warfare to occur. Labor is an essential component to the development of society, and cheap labor such as in the situation of 13th-century French peasants and Mexican-American farmworkers is perceived to be beneficial to the higher end of the hierarchy in the sense that they do not have to pay their laborers the real value of their work. However, in both situations of authority figures attempting to institute cheap labor as a norm comes with high costs, such as the decrease in production due to health concerns of the laborers or the time missed while the workers rebel against the system that they are underneath. The relationship between classism and class warfare is initiated through harsh labor abuses, thus starting a disruption within not only the social order in the sense of hierarchy but the general production of goods as well.

An explicit form of class warfare would be displayed in the Jacquerie, occurring in 1358, a popular revolt by French peasants due to “ever-increasing taxes...the taille” in an attempt to gain basic human rights from upperclassmen and authority figures.¹¹ The Jacquerie arose out of the “desperation and poverty” that the peasants had to endure in daily labor, highlighting one of the high costs of classism and “favouritism” that is “not by the law” by the authority figures of France

¹⁰ “Just the Facts: Poverty Myths and Stereotypes,” *Just Harvest*, accessed April 01, 2016, <http://www.justharvest.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Just-Harvest-Poverty-Myths-Stereotypes-fact-sheet.pdf>.

¹¹ Philip Eidelberg, “The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907: Origins of a Modern Jacquerie,” (Leiden: Brill Archives, 1974), 190.

to favor the upperclassmen.¹² William Davis, an American historian as well as an educator, writes about the social environment of the “burghers,” members of the bourgeoisie in feudal France, taking into consideration of the social norms at the time as well as historical plausibility. Davis writes in “The Life of the Peasants” confirming that without a significant amount of capital, these peasants could not be well-respected by the rest of society and that “burghers of the towns are a little more respected” because they had a bit more capital than did the peasants.¹³ This relationship between classism and class warfare is dangerous to the well-being of the society, socially and economically as presented in the aftermath of the Jacquerie revolts. Although the French nobles suppressed the peasants, the results rippled through France’s society and are perceived as traumatizing especially to the aristocracy. The fear that ensued within the authority figures is a common link between Mexican-American farmworkers and the feudal peasants despite the large time gap and slight differences within their governing systems.

The Chicano Movement happened in the 1960’s, with its origins starting from the lack of rights that Mexican-American farmworkers received during the 1950’s with the *Bracero* Program. The favoritism of financially-stable individuals in society due to the increasing consumer culture within America in addition to the labor exploitation of the laborers provided a stable base for class warfare to occur. A conflict between the Mexican-American farmworkers and their authority figures who were miscellaneous food corporations such as S&W Fine Foods arose highlighting the socio-economic struggles of the farmworkers. An increasing consumer culture in America was due to the growth within technological developments plus many Americans were financially well off after

¹² Samuel Cohn, “Popular Protest in Late-Medieval Europe: Italy, France and Flanders,” (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 144.

¹³ Williams Davis, *Life on a Medieval Barony* (New York: Biblio & Tannen Publishers, 1990), 257.

WWII due to investments during the war plus the lack of consumption.¹⁴ Consumer culture discriminates Mexican-Americans since it allows those that can pay with capital leftover to “demonstrate his/her social class to others.”¹⁵ Since many Mexicans were making well below the minimum wage at the time, this would mean that there would be a social as well as an economic segregation between them and the rest of society that were financially stable. Popular consumer culture highlights the corrupt government at hand that was willing to use cheap labor, like Mexican-American farmworkers, to produce items that would be sold at much higher prices. An example of a class warfare movement that leads to the decline of a corporation because they exploited their workers was the DiGiorgio Strike lead by Ernesto Galarza in the early 1950’s. The DiGiorgio Corporation owned S&W Fine Foods and was a multi-billion dollar fruit-growing corporation that was known for exploiting their Mexican-American farmworkers who “had no choice but to work for less than their American counterparts” with wages well below the minimum wage at the time.¹⁶ Protests lead by Ernesto Galarza caused a significant dent in the DiGiorgio Corporation’s sales due to publishing flyers and news articles with instructions for the public on how to boycott DiGiorgio’s products.¹⁷ These protests were partly successful in the sense that it caused the corporation to sign with Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers Organizing Committee later

¹⁴ Doris Goodwin, “The Way We Won: America’s Economic Breakthrough During World War II,” *The American Prospect*, last modified 1992, <http://prospect.org/article/way-we-won-americas-economic-breakthrough-during-world-war-ii>.

¹⁵ Jovan Hernandez, “Development and psychometric validation of the Perceived Classism Scales: measures of perceived social class discriminatinon,” PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), University of Iowa , 2013, 15 <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4895&context=etd>.

¹⁶ “Obscure Political Heroes,” *Lordstown Syndrome*, last modified July 05, 2011, <https://lordstownsyndrome.wordpress.com/tag/national-farm-labor-union/>.

¹⁷ “Please Don’t Buy Tree-Sweet Fruit Juices S&W Fine Foods,” *The Movement: DiGiorgio Boycott Supplement* (San Francisco, CA), <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/ufwarchives/sncc/14-June%201966%20Supplement.pdf>.

during the 1960's which was intended to give more leniency towards unions as well as more basic rights towards the workers.¹⁸

The peasant revolt allowed the aristocracy to become more aware towards the peasant's to avoid the threat of rebellion that would leave cottages burning, thousands of commoners dead, as well as the abrupt decrease in the production of goods that society relied on the peasants to produce. The Mexican-American Farmworkers boycott was comparable since there was some amount of impact on the rest of society to be able to recognize the invisible margins that were constructed by a corrupt government to benefit those of the "upper class at the expense of the lower class."¹⁹

Even though the governments that both groups were under intended to improve their society through the usage of cheap labor to save capital, the results of the exploitation of the labor of vulnerable individuals proved to cost more than it saved. These costs were displayed through the dramatic setbacks that were caused by protests and boycotts that decreased the amount of production both groups of laborers normally produced. Delays that were caused by the frustrations of the workers were only escalated due to the amount of classism that was implemented throughout society with favoritism among the wealthy. The consumer culture of 1950's America and the strict class structure of 13th-century France displayed favoritism through glorifying new inventions and developments that were often pricey and owned by those that were financially stable. The momentum of the protests and boycotts were only partially successful in raising awareness towards the situation of the "working poor" which was intended to decrease the amount of corporations that

¹⁸ R. Di Giorgio, letter to Cesar Chavez, April 6, 1966, <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/essays/essays/MillerArchive/10%20Letter%20to%20Cesar%20Chavez%20from%20DiGiorgio%20Corp.%20April%206,1966.pdf>.

¹⁹ "What is Classism," *Class Action*, accessed April 05, 2016, <http://www.classism.org/about-class/what-is-classism/>.

exploited their workers. Despite the fact that not all labor exploitations in developed nations have been abolished, there has been a significant impact from the explicit, widely accepted forms of labor abuses to a community that is more well-informed upon these ideas which lead to the general decrease in the motivation for corporations or society to implement abusive labor regulations. France and America, both developed nation have shown increased rights for not only individual workers such as “paid vacation” and “sick leave” but have been more tolerant towards labor unions to prevent a drastic setback as shown within the revolts and protests of the 13th-century peasants and Mexican-American farmworkers during the 1950’s.²⁰

In conclusion, labor is a crucial element in society and to overwork and mistreat its workers hinders the progress that the society takes to become economically and socially developed. French peasants of the 13th century and Mexican-American farmworkers of the 1950’s were one of the most prominent groups of workers in their region at their specific time. Both groups were mistreated due to the culture of classism that grew from corrupt governments that oppressed these vulnerable workers. Although the intentions of enforcing cheap labor were to benefit society as a whole through the means of saving capital, these exploitations of laborers have proven to be harmful towards the socio-economic expansion of the society in the cases of the 13th-century French peasants as well as 1950’s Mexican-American farmworkers.

Word count: 2182

²⁰ “36 reasons why you should thank a union,” *Union Plus*, accessed April 05, 2016, <https://www.unionplus.org/about/labor-unions/36-reasons-thank-union>.

Bibliography

Davis, Williams. *Life on a Medieval Barony*. New York: Biblio & Tannen Publishers, 1990.

“Discrimination Against Hispanics, Latinos, and Mexican Americans, and the Need for more Civil Rights Lawyers in California.” *HG.org Legal Resources*. Accessed April 05, 2016.
<https://www.hg.org/article.asp?id=6051>.

Goodman, Richard. “The Politics of Agricultural Labor: Braceros And Farmworkers in the 1950s.” *Onda Latina*. Accessed April 05, 2016.
https://www.laits.utexas.edu/onda_latina/program?sernum=000534559&term=.

Velasquez, Baldemar. “Oppression and Farmworker Health in a Global Economy.”
<https://www.panna.org/sites/default/files/imported/files/OppressionandFarmworkerHealthGlobalEconomy.pdf>.

“History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009).” *United States Department of Labor*.
<http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm>.

Calavita, Kitty. “Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S.” New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2010.

Hernandez, Jovan. “Development and psychometric validation of the Perceived Classism Scales: measures of perceived social class discrimination.” *University of Iowa*. 2013.
<http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4895&context=etd>.

“Just the Facts: Poverty Myths and Stereotypes.” *Just Harvest*. Accessed April 01, 2016.
<http://www.justharvest.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Just-Harvest-Poverty-Myths-Stereotypes-fact-sheet.pdf>.

Eidelberg, Philip. *The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907: Origins of a Modern Jacquerie*. Leiden: Brill Archives, 1974.

Cohn, Samuel. *Popular Protest in Late-Medieval Europe: Italy, France and Flanders*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

Goodwin, Doris. “The Way We Won: America’s Economic Breakthrough During World War II.” *The American Prospect*. Last modified 1992.
<http://prospect.org/article/way-we-won-americas-economic-breakthrough-during-world-war-ii>.

“Obscure Political Heroes.” *Lordstown Syndrome*. Last modified July 05, 2011.

<https://lordstownsyntax.wordpress.com/tag/national-farm-labor-union/>.

“Please Don’t Buy Tree-Sweet Fruit Juices S&W Fine Foods.” *The Movement: DiGiorgio Boycott Supplement* (San Francisco, CA).

<https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/ufwarchives/sncc/14-June%201966%20Supplement.pdf>.

Di Giorgio, R. Letter to Cesar Chavez. April 6, 1966.

<https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/essays/essays/MillerArchive/10%20Letter%20to%20Cesar%20Chavez%20from%20DiGiorgio%20Corp.%20April%206,1966.pdf>.

“What is Classism.” *Class Action*. Accessed April 05, 2016,

<http://www.classism.org/about-class/what-is-classism/>.

“36 reasons why you should thank a union.” *Union Plus*. Accessed April 05, 2016.

<https://www.unionplus.org/about/labor-unions/36-reasons-thank-union>.