

Film Review of *Parasite*

By

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Parasite, directed and co-written by Bong Joon-ho, is a 2019 South Korean film about economic positions in a capitalist society. In class-based societies, people are divided into categories that are distributed across a social hierarchy based on access to resources such as wealth, property, power, and prestige (Moya and Fiske 2017). While stratification is a world-wide phenomenon, among the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States ranks first and South Korea second in the size of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots (Kim 2020). In recent years, South Korean family-owned conglomerates have increased accumulation strategies which have redistributed wealth upwards and increased social inequality (Park 2013).

Some have labeled the film *Parasite* as a cinematic parable that subverts and exposes the injustices of capitalism (Noh 2020). Others see this film as highlighting capitalism as the dominant ideology/religion of Western societies, as residents of such societies subscribe to the rules of discourse, beliefs and practices (Kim 2019). 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” (Bong Joon-ho quoted in Ulaby 2019).

This award winning, genre-switching film about two economically-distant Korean families starts as a dark comedy first introducing the Kims, an economically struggling but emotionally-connected family of four. Their income source is folding pizza boxes for a store that outsources the work. Their home is a squalid, cramped and dingy apartment. This home has a window that looks out into a street where people throw garbage and urinate against the walls. In somewhat humorous scenes, the Kims steal Wi-Fi connections and open the

window to get free street fumigation into their home to eliminate stink bugs.

The Kim family’s fortunes change when the teenage son, Ki-woo, is recommended by a friend to be the English tutor for the daughter of the affluent Park family. With fake credentials created by his sister, Ki-woo he becomes “Kevin” and ingratiates himself into the Park family. Mrs. Park points out that she doesn’t trust anyone anymore so she hires help only through recommendations. As a result, Ki-woo/Kevin is subsequently able to successfully recommend his gifted, artistic sister Ki-jung who is hired to be the Park’s son’s art “teacher/therapist.” He does this without revealing their kinship. Ki-jung becomes Jessica and soon uses deceit to oust the family’s chauffeur, enabling their father, Ki-taek, to be hired. Finally, Ki-taek effectively schemes to replace the original housekeeper, Moon-gwang, with his own wife, Chung-sook.

Throughout this part of the film, the Parks do not know that the four Kims are related. Although they are dishonest, the Kims are depicted as a poor but hardworking and emotionally close family whose deceptions are presented as the sole way out of poverty. On the other hand, the wealthy Parks are presented as entitled, self-involved and shallow.

The film soon takes an even darker turn. While the Parks are away on a trip, the Kims take over their house with great delight only to discover the former housekeeper’s husband, Geun-se, living in the Park’s secret bomb shelter apartment beneath the house. He has been hidden there for years to escape loan sharks. Moon-gwang begs the Kims to allow her husband to remain hidden there but the Kims refuse. Violence between the couple and the Kims escalates with Moon-gwang falling down the stairs and dying. While

Parasite focuses mainly on inter-class conflict, the brutal fights between the two working-poor families illustrate intra-class struggles. These battles represent how advancement under capitalism means beating out peers for limited opportunities (Seo 2019).

Overcome by the death of his wife, Geun-sae escapes the bunker, hits Ki-woo with a rock and fatally stabs Ki-jung. Chaos ensues with others injured and Mr. Park dead. Ki-Woo recovers from near death and, with his father, sneaks into the hidden basement of the house to avoid capture. In an imagined scene, Ki-Woo plans to make money, buy the house and free his father. However, this is only a fantasy because of the impossibility of economic mobility.

The film depicts members of the working class in conflict with one another while the rich live comfortably, depending on the labor of others. Psychosocial factors, including stereotypes, beliefs, and ideologies about one's own group, other groups, and society in general, result from belonging to a particular social class and perpetuate social class divides (Moya and Fisk 2017).

Behavioral signals of social class create the potential for others to hold prejudiced attitudes and engage in discriminatory behavior towards those from lower social classes (Manstead 2018). Mr. Park illustrates this with his frequent comments that those beneath him should not "cross the line" in conversation *or* behavior. He comments that the Kims have a distinctive smell, like the people who ride the subway. He says that Mr. Kim smells like an old radish or a boiled rag – a "smell crosses the line." At times Mr. and Mrs. Park note that the Kims are being paid for their extra hours of labor and, therefore, should not complain about being constantly on-call despite any hardships that may cause them.

Bong Joon-ho presents his characters as products of their upbringing. While Mrs. Park spends almost all her time in the house, she is unaware of what is really going on. Although she is naïve and gullible, the director does *not* present her dumb. He says, "She's smart. She probably did well in school. It's just that she trusts people too easily because she's never experienced anything bad happen to her. You know, that character, she probably married into a rich family very young, led a very sheltered life under her parents, and never really struggled. I think you need to have something bad happen to you to start doubting people" (Bong Joon-ho quoted in Paiella 2019).

The Kims' behavior and viewpoints are also influenced by class. The Kims have learned how to be subservient and give the impression of empathy and connection

without actually becoming too familiar or impressed with their employers. In one scene, in response her husband's comment that Mrs. Park is nice even though she's rich, Chung-sook notes the class divide by replying that Mrs. Park is nice *because* she's rich (Di Placido 2020).

The class structure is presented in many ways in this film. Although fairly close to each other geographically, the houses of the two families are worlds apart. Cinematographer Hong Kyung-pyo explains that he conveyed the class divide through vertical compositions, rain, stairs, and contrasting lighting conditions. The modernist Parks house is large, clean, filled with sunlight, and set high on a hill overlooking a large lawn. In contrast, the Kims live in a messy, cramped, dark semi-basement in the lowland (Desowitz 2019).

Circumstances and values between the classes also differ greatly. After a night of very heavy rains, the slums are flooded and the sewers overflow. The Kims and hundreds of others lose most of their belongings and crowd together to sleep in a shelter. In contrast, in their spacious house, the Parks are untouched by the disaster and plan an over-the-top birthday party for their spoiled young son.

Another interesting way that the gap between classes is presented in this film is through food. While the Kim family consumes the bare minimum of food—usually obtained from vending machines, the Park family consumes food prepared by their housekeeper in luxurious excess from their fully-stocked refrigerators and pantries (Turner 2021). While we see the Kims eating pizza and noodles, the Parks eat from beautiful fruit platters and when they eat noodles it is topped with expensive Hanwoo beef.

In each plot development, the director asks us (the film viewers) to consider who the parasites are. He argues that "Because the story is about the poor family infiltrating and creeping into the rich house, it seems very obvious that *Parasite* refers to the poor family...But if you look at it the other way around, you can say that rich family are also parasites in terms of hiring others to do jobs for them. The Parks do *not* even wash their own dishes or drive themselves. Instead, they leech off the poor family's labor. So both families are parasites" (Ankers 2020).

With humor and pathos Bong Joon-ho demonstrates that capitalism and wealth disparity affects both poor and rich families. Upon the release of the film, he offered the following director's statement posted at the Coolidge Corner Theater (Bong Joon-ho 2019):

For people of different circumstances to live together in the same space is not easy.

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 neighbors, friends and colleagues, who have merely been pushed to the edge of a precipice.

As a depiction of ordinary people who fall into an unavoidable commotion, this film is:

a comedy without clowns,
a tragedy without villains,

all leading to a violent tangle and a headlong plunge down the stairs.

You are all invited to this unstopably fierce tragicomedy.

As sociologists and other observers reflect on the parasites of the world, they are likely to watch this tragi-comedy with despair. We must ask what is ahead for a world in thrall to the religion of global capitalism. Well-conducted sociological research can tell us about the net impact of continued globalization. We need to understand the balance of positive and negative effects of both capitalism and globalization on the lives and well-being of the residents of developing and developed countries.

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