

The Climate Crisis Cannot Be Resolved under Capitalism

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“[W]e take particularly thine, To save the ruin of a multitude: And better one want for a common good, Than many perish for a private man” (Marlowe, Act I). *The Jew of Malta* sets up a dichotomy between two ideas; the sharing of wealth amongst society and its concentration in a private individual. Barabas is unwilling to sacrifice personal comforts and luxuries, even if it were to mean the betterment of society as a whole. His greed, manipulation of others, dishonesty, and ruthlessness are facets mirrored by many of today’s ruling class, leading to the climate crisis we currently face. In humanity’s dogged pursuit of riches, we have neglected our environment and those around us, becoming blind to the harm we inflict. It is of course in our best interest to resolve the climate crisis, but such long-term thinking is antithetical to human nature under capitalism.

Greed is a central trait of Barabas. The man is obsessed with hoarding wealth. He places little value upon the beauty of the gems he collects, instead admiring only their monetary worth and the power it grants. It is a sad and twisted existence. “And, as their wealth increaseth, so inclose / Infinite riches in a little room.” (Marlowe, Act I). The repeated use of ‘i’ here creates a feeling of being fenced into a room; the walls grow ever tighter as the piles of wealth increase in vastness. Boundless power exists within these walls, but it is a power that Barabas controls. The concentration of such immense wealth within a small area is of great appeal to him. It is the mark of a deeply insecure person to be so enamoured with money. Barabas has built his ego around material things such as his gold and jewels. It is a toxic mindset, attaching one’s ego to wealth, power, or popularity. Ultimately, Barabas, like any of us, is searching for happiness and a sense of completion/satisfaction in life. While unfortunate that he has chosen materialism as his pursuit, it is society that has taught him to function this way. It is the value that society places upon the jewels that motivates Barabas to hoard them, rewarding his greed and promoting its growth.

Thurn points out a distinction between the capital of Barabas's time and today's society, "Unlike the mechanisms of capital in the late modern era, which permit it to ... expand at an increasing rate, merchant's capital remains closely linked in the period to a legal and political monopoly which safeguards traditional territorial privileges" (162). Thus, the problems described here are exacerbated even further as there is less restraint upon the growth of capital.

In today's society, greed is not punished; nor should it be. When controlled, greed is good for the individual, providing motivation to work. It is when said greed becomes excessive and harmful to others that it must be reined in. This is where capitalism fails. Capitalism's idea of greed goes beyond self-preservation, venturing into a realm in which the individual takes priority over all else; a mindset all too familiar to Barabas. This prioritisation of the individual leads to neglect of wider society and our present ignorance of the climate crisis. When faced with the facts of global warming, it is excessive greed that prevents us from acting; we will not upset the status quo of our lives nor make sacrifices. Alas, Barabas's greed does not end with wealth; he also possesses a thirst for power over those around him.

Barabas derives great satisfaction from having power over others. He is unable to see the worth of people past what they can provide him. They are but pieces on a chessboard, to be manipulated and played to his benefit. He does not appear capable of empathy and places little value upon human life. Barabas openly acknowledges his use of others, "And he from whom my most advantage comes, / Shall be my friend." (Marlowe, Act V). Friends are mere resources; numbers on a page from which influence can be extracted. Their importance to Barabas is directly tied to their usefulness. These eyes can be compared to that of the modern-day capitalist. A person is only as valuable as the work they can provide. You are reduced to an asset. Barabas does not shy from turning his assets against each other when it so suits, "So; now will I go in to Lodowick, / And, like a cunning spirit, feign some lie, / Till I have set 'em both at enmity" (Marlowe, Act II). Barabas schemes with an inhuman deftness, tricking Mathias and Lodowick into killing each other. One might expect him to feel some level of guilt that his actions led to the death of two young men. He instead celebrates what has been yet another successful plan; entertained and overjoyed by his control of others. Barabas extracts pleasure from

his manipulative vengeance. This need for revenge becomes an obsession. His lack of empathy and cold, unfeeling psychopathy is reflected in the elite of society. Sociopaths rise quickly within the ranks of corporations; their ruthlessness rewarded all too often.

When Abigail discovers her father is behind the deaths of Mathias and Lodowick, she expresses shock at his actions. “Hard-hearted father, unkind Barabas!” (Marlowe, Act III). She rebels against him and becomes a Christian nun. Barabas sees this repudiation as the ultimate slight; he swiftly poisons both his daughter and the nuns. Abigail was only ever valuable to Barabas as a tool to control others and when she shirked this control, he became enraged; a warning to those who rebel against him. Through hegemony, modern capitalism similarly extinguishes rebellion and independent thought. Capitalism’s conversion of people into assets, its benefactors’ lack of empathy, and its all-encompassing hegemony all contribute to the inaction on climate we face. Park describes how “The heart of our pressing environmental woes is that capitalism is incapable of accurately assessing and conveying the true value of natural resources.” (201). This inability to understand the value of natural resources is tied to an inability to understand people; capitalism does not acknowledge the irreplaceable. It instead assumes that the market will always create an alternative, a dangerous and misleading assumption.

Political power is not something that Barabas actively seeks within *The Jew of Malta*. He sees titles such as the kingship as better left to the Christians. “I must confess we come not to be kings” (Marlowe, Act I). Barabas is more content to exert his power through manipulation rather than rule outright. Nevertheless, he finds himself in a position of political power and is nominated as governor of Malta. “I now am Governor of Malta. True, / But Malta hates me, and in hating me / My life’s in danger” (Marlowe, Act V). Barabas recognises that a leader’s political power rests in the people. Therefore, to maintain said power, actions must be taken to appease the people. Base populism is a common feature of modern governments and in recent years, climate action has increasingly come to be viewed as necessary by the people. Whilst the pursuit of profit is not a goal synonymous with climate action, there does remain space within capitalism for small efforts. Thus, leaders have begun to make these efforts. We have seen these token actions throughout the

years; the Paris Agreement, Ireland's 'Green budget'. These agreements do not go far enough; they do not upset the power balance and do not remove nor reform the structures that continue to worsen the climate crisis. Indeed, capitalism's cycle of growth does little to incentivise action beyond slight policy tweaks.

Barabas's reaction to becoming governor is also interesting in that he displays little interest in actually ruling. One would think Barabas would be enthralled by such power, but he appears more enthused by plotting; the game has become more enticing than the reward. Not content to merely play the game well, Barabas shows off his skill in his final speech, "Know, Governor, 'twas I that slew thy son; / I framed the challenge that did make them meet. / Know, Calymath, I aimed thy overthrow" (Marlowe, Act V). In this crazed speech, Barabas gleefully details his plots to Ferneze and Calymath. He continues to chase the 'high' that manipulation and increasing his wealth provides. This addiction controls all. No amount of wealth, power, or fiendish plots would have been enough to satisfy Barabas. Capitalism motivates these feelings within people by luring them with the myth of infinite economic growth. The elite find themselves trapped in a similar cycle to that of Barabas, sating themselves with short-term luxuries; ignoring the long-term consequences of their pursuit of profit. Just as Barabas's addiction made his demise inevitable, capitalism's addiction to growth will lead to our own demise.

Barabas is the ultimate personification of society's focus on the individual over the wider group. The prejudices he faces twist his worldview into one of pure hate. This is not something he is shy about; openly expressing his bitterness and desire for others to suffer. "For, so I live, perish may all the world!" (Marlowe, Act V). This hatred is borne out of a feeling of being wronged. Barabas also rises to meet the expectations of others. In this way, he can be compared to the character of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; both resign themselves to evil and accept the role that is forced upon them. "Thou perceiv'st the plight / Wherein these Christians have oppressed me. / Be ruled by me, for in extremity / We ought make bar of no policy" (Marlowe, Act I). Barabas feels that it is only right he return society's wrongdoings with his own evil actions. It is a mentality much incentivised by capitalism. Whilst the vast majority of people do not take said mentality to the extremes that Barabas does, it nevertheless manifests itself in the form of the public's apathy. This apathy

towards system change maintains our current status quo; the “I’m alright, Jack” mindset that has become increasingly common in recent years. Psychopathic billionaires take advantage of this apathy to work to their gain. Unlike Barabas however, their immorality may not necessarily be their undoing. Tkacz describes how Barabas’s actions lead to his death, “the wicked who seeks the destruction of the innocent is himself destroyed, and by the very means he had devised for another’s harm.” (48). Capitalist billionaires will not suffer the consequences of global warming; they will not burn in the pit but instead cast the innocent man in their place. The Barabas of today shall not writhe and burn in his trap, he shall watch from afar as capitalism grants him a safe haven away from the forest fires and mass droughts.

The elite are keenly aware that they construct this trap and just like Barabas, they employ a great amount of theatrics to lead us into it. Ide describes Barabas’s many forms, “In fact, he continually acts as a Job-like sufferer, an obstinate Jewish father, a Christian proselyte, a French musician, or a dead person ... Through the repetition of Barabas’s successful theatrical enterprises, Marlowe seems to draw the attention of the audience to his monstrosity.” (259). We see the same theatrics in fossil fuel CEOs and their ilk. The profit motive actively discourages climate research and has spawned many pieces of climate denial over the years. In 1989, “Exxon and other fossil fuel companies created the Global Climate Coalition (GCC). The GCC is created to oppose mandatory reductions in carbon emissions by obscuring the scientific understanding of fossil fuels’ impact on the climate.” (Greenpeace, 15). Capitalism stimulates dishonesty by prioritising the creation of capital over the preservation of life. Exxon and others were aware of the scientific research and actively chose to suppress it. Their climate denial is wholly intentional and malicious; a fiendish performance that would undoubtedly make Barabas proud.

The dichotomy around wealth established by *The Jew of Malta* is closely tied to the factors which have led to the climate crisis. If we are to take real climate action, our economic system & relationship to work and capital must be re-evaluated. There is a lack of political will to do so; an ideological opposition to upsetting the current power balance. Indeed, we are faced with a political establishment concerned only with keeping the gears of the economy turning. The time has passed for policy

tweaks and token deals such as the Paris climate agreement. We must transition to a social organisation in which the means of production are owned and regulated by the wider community, not private individuals. Any climate action must be accompanied by a commitment to ending class divisions, lest the burden of the transition be placed upon ordinary people through regressive carbon taxes and the like. (Molyneux, 7). The wealthy may try to appease us with thin promises of charity; too often are their gifts disguising tax breaks. To live as a billionaire is an inherently immoral disposition. Machiavel describes Barabas in the prologue, “Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramm’d; / Which money was not got without my means.” (Marlowe, Prologue). This establishes to the audience that Barabas acquired his vast wealth through scheming; a lesson that must also be heeded. The elite did not get where they are through kindness or generosity. Ultimately, it is us, the public, that must break free of the “dopamine treadmill” we lay trapped within. There are signs of our disenfranchised youth growing ever more radical and dissatisfied with the current system; perhaps change will come but time is short, and the clock is forever ticking.

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