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Parenting for Progress: Reflections on Matt Ross's *Captain Fantastic*

Abstract

Matt Ross's film *Captain Fantastic* explores the difficulties of raising one's kids to be critical of modern capitalistic society. This essay explores the parenting lessons that can be taken from the film in connection with contemporary politics and protest movements. As people who are concerned with social justice, this essay attempts to think through the question: how should we be raising our children in these tormented, unjust times?

Keywords

Film Review, Critical Film Review, *Captain Fantastic*

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Cover Page Footnote

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(Google Images)

You're a radical. You know how undemocratic American politics are. You know how unjust neoliberal imperial capitalism is. You know how poisonous its ideological tentacles are and how powerfully pervasive and persuasive they can be. You're also a parent, with kids ranging from adolescent girls to an eighteen-year-old boy. The question is, how should you raise your kids and what are the trade-offs of choosing one approach over another? With some additional powerful narrative elements, this is precisely the position of Ben (played, in an Oscar-worthy performance, by Viggo Mortensen) in director-writer Matt Ross's *Captain Fantastic*. A comedic-drama exploring questions of parenting, relationships, anti-capitalist resistance, and mental illness, Ross's fantastically original film follows Ben and his six kids ranging from toddler to teenager from their isolated primitivist life in the woods of the Pacific Northwest in the United States onto their eventual journey to attend the funeral of the mother, who committed suicide while under hospital care for a severe, debilitating mental illness. Ben teaches his kids to hunt, grow their own food, fight, read Dostoyevsky and Chomsky (the latter of which they have a dedicated holiday for, replacing Christmas, because of its religious and consumeristic dimensions). Ben's fundamental parenting tactic is honesty. He never lies to his children. Ever. No matter what the topic. Secondary to his blunt honesty, Ben demands that all of his children participate in their family activities and contribute to the benefit of the family through a variety of daily tasks ranging from watering the vegetables to skinning the day's kill. They are all articulate and knowledgeable to the point where even the eight year old understands the sexist, racist, alienating aspects of capitalist modernity and postmodernity.

They're still kids though. They razz each other, including their dad. They make and play with toys. They play pretend. They like singing and dancing. The older children like arguing. For all the eccentricities of their lifestyle, the family dynamic is still fairly "normal" in many ways. In one of the subtly hilarious moments early in the film, the oldest son Bo is with his father getting gas, and is walking into the store to pay as three girls around his age are walking out. They try to talk to him, but he just stares awkwardly in silence and they walk away. A few seconds later Ben says: "Go talk to 'em. We got time." To which Bo replies: "Ask her what she thinks of the working people creating an armed revolution against the exploiting classes and their state

structures?... Or whether or not she's a dialectical materialist and accords primacy to the class struggle?" Ben, half-laughing but taking his son's point seriously, gives some sagely advice most of us have heard or given at some point in our lives: "Avoid Marxism. Or telling her you're a Trotskyite." And in an entirely typical teenage response, Bo corrects his father: "Trotskyist. Only a Stalinist would call a Trotskyist a Trotskyite. And I'm not a Trotskyist anymore. I'm a Maoist."



(Credit: Everett/Rex/Shutterstock, from The Guardian)

Shortly after this point, the family becomes aware of the mother's suicide. How the family reacts is an incredible object lesson in effective mourning. Ben is very honest about his wife's and their mother's illness being what led her to commit suicide. They are all angry and upset and allowed to express that anger with one another. Shortly after this, we find out that Ben is reviled by his wife's family, precisely for his political views (another thing a lot of leftists can sympathize with), but in this case, this leads Ben and his kids being forbidden from attending the funeral. They decide to take the several day drive to the funeral anyway. Along the way the family stops at a grocery store where the children and Ben orchestrate an extremely effective plot to steal groceries from a supermarket. Probably not the shining moment of parenting in the film, but it does reinforce the idea that basic necessities should not be turned into commodities restricted to those who can afford to pay for them. Given the harm that capitalistic commodification has on our world, I'd say a bit of criminality is a small price to pay to have more people realize that there are few things worse than mass commodification of more and more aspects of human life.

They then stop at Ben's sister-in-law Harper's (played by Kathryn Hahn) home and here we see a drastic comparison between Ben's parenting style and mainstream parenting. Harper's kids ask how their aunt died, and Harper refuses to tell them the truth saying that she was sick and implies this was something like cancer. Visibly disturbed by their bullshitting, Ben tells his nephews exactly what happened. Harper and her husband are furious and storm out. The next day Harper pleads with Ben to enroll his kids in an actual school (as opposed to illegally home-schooling them in the woods). Ben proves the effectiveness of his teaching compared to his nephews' public high school education. He calls the two boys down and asks them what the Bill of Rights is. The younger one replies: "Um, what something costs, I guess." Next up, the older nephew. He replies, "It's a government thing, right? Like, rights that people have in America and stuff." Pretty bad for a high schooler, but not wrong. The next part of this scene is priceless. Ben calls

his eight-year old daughter Zaja down. She begins reciting the Bill of Rights word for word by memory. Ben stops her, saying “Regurgitating memorized amendments isn't what I'm asking for. Just tell me something about it in your own words.”

She begins again, “Without the bill of rights, we'd be more like China. Here, at least, we don't have warrantless searches. We have free speech. Citizens are protected from cruel and unusual punishments...” To further make his point to Harper, Ben asks Zaja about Citizens United. To which she's gives a perfectly Chomskyan depiction--to Harper's annoyance. This scene is cute, funny, and a scathing indictment of our public education system.

After crashing his wife's funeral and using one of his daughters to break into his father-in-law's home during which the daughter falls off the roof and is badly injured, Ben is threatened into giving his kids to his wife's parents to live or else be sued for custody. It is in the hospital talking to the doctor about how close his daughter was to being paralyzed that Ben realizes the dangers of his lifestyle for his kids. The children are left with their grandparents, but being the well-trained rebels they are, escape to be with their dad again. In the end, Ben realizes that his parenting approach is not the healthiest way to raise his kids. It is in these scenes where Ben is deciding to give up his kids that Mortensen's incredible acting is most obvious (I was brought to tears for a good ten minutes through this portion of the film—not an easy task for a movie to accomplish).

While the movie ends with what appears to be a massive compromise. The family settles into a regular house, with a small farm. The children are shown completing homework for their move back into a traditional public school education. It seems as though they've mostly given up their radical vision and embraced a more “healthy” normalcy. While this interpretation is literally accurate, I want to suggest that the audience is given very little information about what this new life is like, and despite it appearing fairly normal, besides raising their own chickens and vegetables, how the audience imagines what their life is actually like beyond what we are shown is essential for preserving the radical message offered in the early two-thirds of the film. Do we know that the family is not part of a larger food co-op? Do we know that Ben isn't getting directly engaged with the local school board and PTA pushing them to teach more factual and critical material? Do we know that he isn't challenging his children to continue to question the veracity of mainstream narratives about the goodness and legitimacy of American liberal “democracy” and imperial capitalism? I choose to think that all of these aspects are still major components of their new “normal” life. Despite a lack of evidence for or against this interpretation of the film's conclusion, this interpretation allows us to think about how we should raise our children in a world defined by rampant violence, exploitation, oppression, and consumeristic apathy. The lesson of *Captain Fantastic* is that we cannot run away from a society defined by these horrors. Retreat is failure and a form of complicity. Why does it matter if you read Chomsky in the woods by yourself and never put that critical disposition to work within society? The lesson here is also that we should not concede to the traditional neoliberal parenting norms that demand that you teach your kids to be well-behaved, acquiescent consumers of useless things and of the politics of bullshit, hate, and injustice.

The lessons of *Captain Fantastic* are more crucial now than they were just a few months ago when the film was originally released. We all now live in the world where Donald J. Trump will

be President of the United States. And while the lessons from this film would have been crucial if Hillary Clinton and her neoliberal imperial agenda had ascended to the presidency, a Trump presidency has the likelihood of increasingly normalizing some of the worst aspects of the intersectional exploitations and oppressions of advanced capitalism. We have already seen the rise of hate crimes and hate speech targeted against women, immigrants, Muslims, gays and lesbians, and transgender persons, but beyond this Trump represents the worst ideological manifestations of neoliberalism—economic growth is more important than basic human decency. This was his campaign message and this will be the hallmark of his administration, regardless of whether he is able to achieve any of his ambiguous campaign promises. We have seen this vile bigotry trickled into our elementary schools as well, with reports of white students chanting “Build that wall!” at Hispanic classmates and swastikas and phrases like “Make America White Again” graffitied on buildings. Kids have always found ways to bully one another, but now we have a President who has provided legitimizing narratives for these behaviors. We need something different. We needed something different before Trump, and now this need is all the more urgent.

People are doing this work. Parents are having tough conversations with their children. Our children are watching us. Will they see us call for unity in support of a massively unjust socioeconomic system and President that represents the pains of unequal deindustrialization and not-so-latent bigotry, or will they see us standing, speaking out, and passionately and thoughtfully resisting, fighting to build a better world than we had and surely a better world than Donald Trump will leave us with? After attending a roughly three to four thousand strong anti-Trump protest in Miami, FL on November 11, I can say that I saw a lot of families there. I saw pre-teen girls leading hundreds of adults in a “This is what democracy looks like!” chant as we peacefully marched across I-95. I saw a young teenage boy with his family chanting “Love Trumps Hate” holding a sign that read “Real Men Respect Women.” I even saw this very young girl with her dad holding a sign that read “No bullies allowed” (pictured below). These parents are showing their children that standing up against injustice is something that is best accomplished in solidarity with others, that when one senses injustice, we speak out. We resist—in the grand American protest tradition. This is the political engagement that *Captain Fantastic*’s anti-consumeristic message lacks. We cannot resist injustice in isolation, even if this means that we need to participate and dirty our hands to more effectively resist. We cannot and should not retreat into the woods. We must teach our children the lessons of *Captain Fantastic*, but we must do it from within the oppressive yet dialectical confines of undemocratic late capitalism.



(Credit: Bryant William Sculos, Nov. 11, 2016)