

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 4

2019

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Recommended Citation

Sculos, Bryant W. (2019) "Sorry to Bother You with Twelve Theses on Boots Riley's "Sorry to Bother You": Lessons for the Left," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.7.1.008320

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol7/iss1/4>

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Sorry to Bother You with Twelve Theses on Boots Riley's "Sorry to Bother You": Lessons for the Left

Abstract

As one of the most overtly anticapitalist major motion pictures to be released in recent times (perhaps ever), Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) offers many crucial lessons for today's Left. This essay provides short, open-ended discussions on twelve of those lessons.

Keywords

Sorry to Bother You, Boots Riley

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Cover Page Footnote

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(Source: 20th Century Fox/Google Images)

1. Films thus far have merely interpreted the world; the point however is to change it....

This would be more appropriate as thesis eleven, but it is a crucial starting point for what follows. No matter how radical, no matter how popular, a critical film is, a film by itself, not even one as prescient and valuable as *Sorry to Bother You* is, is enough to change the world. Not that anyone would suggest that it could be, but radical films can serve important purposes in the struggle against capitalism and various forms of oppression. A good radical film can inspire and even simply entertain those engaged in struggle—or those thinking about becoming more active. *Sorry to Bother You* will not change the world, but it can be an important basis for motivation, critical conversation, and necessary enjoyment for those in struggling to do just that.

2. Tactics should always be informed by an organized strategy.

Sorry to Bother You highlights the difference between pure subversive tactics and an organized strategy for resistance. In the film there is a group of anarchist-types, of what size or of what degree of organization the audience never sees, whose primary role in the film is to highlight the impotence of pure tactics (in this film, this amounts to clever vandalism) disconnected from a coherent strategy for organized opposition. Juxtaposed to these tactics we see the hard work of organizing a workplace and an eventual strike. While the strike may not have heralded the end of capitalism, the audience bears witness to the clear difference in results (including both the response of the capitalist class and their police force as well as the ability of the strike to bring new layers of people into struggle).

3. As important as the superiority of tactics informed by an organized strategy is, it is perhaps as important how those on the left address their internal disagreements about strategies and tactics.

There is a subtle scene between Squeeze (the labor activist attempting to organize the workers at the telemarketing firm, played by Steven Yeun) and Detroit (perhaps the best radical feminist of color ever seen in a popular US film, played superbly by Tessa Thompson). Squeeze becomes aware that Detroit is part of the anarchist group doing the

anticapitalist vandalism and instead of criticizing Detroit's tactics, Squeeze takes the opportunity to appreciate that they are both on the same side of the struggle. This solidaristic interaction serves as the basis to build deeper, more active solidarity in the future (some of which we see later in the film). It is often difficult for those on the left to ignore or at least put aside disagreements over tactics and strategy, and sometimes it is important that the Left not leave disagreements unaddressed, but *Sorry to Bother You* provides some insight into how the Left can deal with internal, and interpersonal, disagreements in ways that do not further alienate us from one another. After all, the Left needs all the comrades it can get. What makes someone a comrade is a contentious issue to be sure, but it is an important one that the Left should continue to reflect on.

4. Solidarity across identities is crucial.

Perhaps one of the most obvious—though no less important—lessons from *Sorry to Bother You*, with its awesome diverse cast and characters, is that class has colors and genders and a variety of other identities that come with their own unique oppressions that condition the experience of class in diverse ways. Not only does the film illuminate the intersections of racism and capitalism (the “white voices” are the stuff of film legend here), but we also see cross-racial, cross-gender, and even cross- (fictional) species solidarity. If *Sorry to Bother You* does one thing well (and it does way more than just one thing well), it is expressing the importance of building this kind of intersectional solidarity, as well as how the variable experiences of class can be navigated without chauvinism or exclusion. While the treatment of non-fictional racial and gender solidarity is powerful in its own right, Boots Riley's use of the (for now...) fictional equisapiens drives the point home. Ending the exploitation of some group at the expense of others can never be an acceptable Left position.



(Source: The Stanger/Google Images)

5. Art can be radical, but not all subversive art is radical, at least not on its own.

Detroit, in addition to her day job as a sign twirler and then as a telemarketer, is an artist. Beyond the politics of *Sorry to Bother You*, the film also delves into the difficulty of being a subversive artist within the confines of capitalism, which demands that all art be commodifiable in order to be of any value. Despite Detroit's best efforts to resist this pressure, we see her engage in a powerful and uncomfortable piece of performance art where her audience is asked to throw things at her, including broken electronics and blood-

filled balloons. The scene is a bit of a parody of ostensibly “radical” art that is consumed by a primarily bourgeois audience. Subversive art that challenges the commodity-form can itself become commodified, but it can still be useful as a foundation to challenge artistic norms and social conventions, break down the barrier between performer and audience. However, even at its best there is no guarantee that anything will fundamentally change because of these dissensual elements. *Sorry to Bother You* is a better example of what radical, subversive art can be than the artistic performances it portrays—though neither one is the basis for revolutionary activity. While the critical theorists and postmodernists of the late twentieth century are right to emphasize the importance of aesthetics in radical politics and resist the temptation, embodied most noticeably in socialist realism, to use art strictly instrumentally, art disconnected from organized struggle is bound to be as ineffective as any tactic disconnected from organized struggle. *Sorry to Bother You* does not provide a clear alternative, but it does provide a powerful basis to think through the question of how art can relate to radical politics, and radical politics to art, effectively.

6. Material conditions are shaped by ideological conditions, which in turn affect our psychologies.

As the protagonist Cassius “Cash” Green (portrayed by Lakeith Stanfield with incredible complexity and skill to make the audience cringe in every instance they are supposed to) moves up the ladder at the telemarketing company, after living in poverty for years, his perspective on poverty and the plight of workers shifts in perverse but predictable directions. Consciousness is never one-to-one with class position, something that is perhaps still too obvious for the Left to effectively grapple with, but the radical beauty of *Sorry to Bother You* is how well Boots Riley is able to show how consciousness changes as wealth (though not always identical to class position) increases. Capitalism as a whole dehumanizes even those who benefit from it, though workers and the poor and oppressed should have little patience or sympathy for those who benefit unequally from the exploitation they reproduce. As difficult as it is, it is important to remember this, that even as capitalists and the defenders of capitalism come to personify the evils of capitalism, they too are driven by the heinous psycho-social incentives of the system. While this is, in itself, important to be cognizant of, it is more important to be aware of the process through which this happens to middle class people, and even workers fortunate enough to escape the dregs of poverty wages.

7. Contacting your elected officials is not nearly enough and can actually be demoralizing and demobilizing.

One of the best scenes in the film, enhanced by the speed with which it begins and ends, is when Cash decides to make public the genetic alteration plans of Steve Lift (CEO of the Amazon-like WorryFree, played by Armie Hammer). Cash goes on an absurd reality TV show and various news programs to tell the world about the equisapien experiments and implores people to contact their elected officials. The montage ends with WorryFree’s stock rising and the general public excited about the new technological developments. Nothing changes. The lesson here is that Cash was relying on the representatives of the system that encourages the kinds of perversity that Steve Lift represents to solve the

problem. Cash encouraged people to place their hope in decrepit politicians. The audience experiences the results too quickly. The montage is powerful as it stands, but it is worth questioning whether the full range of critical points here might be lost on even a well-focused self-reflective audience (though I noticed so perhaps I'm the one being too cynical). Cash placed his hope in the automatic negative reactions of people—people who have been conditioned by capitalism to view all technological developments as progressive and liberating—to resist those changes. Back in the real world, while there are some instances where outrage may seem (or even actually be) more or less automatic, there is often unseen or unacknowledged organizing and propagandistic work being done to produce an effective public reaction. The best recent example of this is from the 2017 airport protests/occupations in reaction to President Donald Trump's Muslim ban. While some of the people showed up at the airports spontaneously, there were also a number of left-wing groups, of diverse politics, working to make these actions effective. It is likely we would not have witnessed the positive results we saw from these actions had it not been for the quick, organized work of activists on the ground. And yet, it all appeared rather spontaneous.

8. The truth is not enough, and it will not set us free. Truth is not irrelevant, but it is not enough for the Left simply to be “right.”

Related to thesis 7, Cash relies on his exposing the truth to the world to be the catalyst for widespread resistance to the practices of WorryFree. Mind you, this is all taking place in a world where all of the other dehumanizing practices of WorryFree, such as: lifetime contracts for workers, with all room and board provided but without pay, are deemed acceptable. Why would artificially producing human-horse hybrid workers be any different? While there is a vital educational role for the Left to play in providing the factual basis for the need for organized resistance and building an alternative to racist, patriarchal, imperialist capitalism, these facts are not enough. Facts can be interpreted in various ways and perverted by the mouthpieces of capitalism, often most egregiously by the ostensibly liberal vanguard of “progressive” capitalism. The Left needs to not only be “right” but it also needs to provide deeper context and present viable options to pursue. Put differently, in addition to having the truth on its side, the Left needs to be persuasive.

9. Automation is complicated and likely will not take the forms or have the effects the public are often led to believe it will have.

The world has been browbeaten into thinking that the worst consequences of increased automation in the twenty-first century will be mass unemployment. *Sorry to Bother You*, believe it or not, provides a glimpse at one more realistic alternative—as well as a basis for a more honest look at the effects of automation. First, as we have seen throughout the history of capitalism, workers themselves, both physically and psychologically, are made into automatons. Second, the worst consequences of automation is not joblessness but deskilling. Part of the automation of human beings is the decreased cognitive and creative labor that more and more jobs will require or allow. Companies, whether it is WorryFree or Amazon, would much prefer the less expensive route of encouraging society, primarily through culture and schooling, to produce less thoughtful, more compliant workers, rather

than spend huge sums of money on automation technologies that could become obsolete within a few years. Automation technology under capitalism is expensive. On the flipside, people under capitalism have been made to be quite inexpensive. Maybe we all will not be turned into human-horse hybrids, but given the trajectory of undemocratic automatic in the early years of the twenty-first century, we will not likely be looking at a Jetsons-esque lifestyle for everyone. People will likely continue to be subjected to intense pressures to physically, psychologically, and chemically alter themselves in order to acquire even slightly higher wages.



(Source: Vulture/Google Images)

10. People, especially workers within capitalism, are willing to accept very little money or benefits in exchange for their labor and even their lives.

Capitalist exploitation and oppressions degrade people. Capitalist ideology convinces people that they are merely worth whatever some boss is willing to pay them—and they are fortunate to have what little they have. After all, there are plenty of people with less. This reality puts impoverished workers in a terrible situation when bosses try to buy them off to undermine labor organizing or threaten a worker with firing for talking about politics at work. This reality is also part of the root cause of conservative labor union practices, which often sacrifice anything beyond moderate gains in wages and benefits for worker compliance. The promise of a more lavish lifestyle, new clothes and a new car (or really just a car that is reliable) is what motivates Cash to sell-out. Scabs may indeed be the scum of the Earth from a labor organizing perspective (and there's no reason to think otherwise), but they are motivated by the very same things that motivate workers to sell their labor for a wage in the first place. So really, besides the immediacy of the betrayal, what is the difference between a scab and worker who refuses to join their union or a worker who does not vote to support a strike? The results and the motivations are fundamentally identical. This is not a defense of scabbing (as if such a defense were actually possible), but it is a lesson that needs to be learned. Capitalist ideology is extremely powerful, and it compels us all in various ways to become subjects of our exploitation and the exploitation of others. Scabs and other types of non-class-conscious workers are as much a product of capitalism as the credit card is.

11. Sorry to bother—and even betray—you, but apologies and forgiveness matter.

Even after Cash betrays his fellow-workers and friends by crossing their picket lines multiple times, once he realizes his grave error and is determined to join them in struggle, his friends forgive him. They accept his apology. The apology does not change what Cash did, but it reflects his commitment to doing the right things moving forward. This might be one of the hardest lessons for the Left to learn from this movie. How does one forgive someone who has betrayed them, especially when it was not just a friendship that was betrayed but an entire movement? However, put differently, how can the Left ever be successful moving forward without the capacity to forgive and work alongside those who have actively worked against the Left in their past? Where is the place for former liberals (or even former conservatives or reactionaries)? Where is the place for former scabs? *Sorry to Bother You* argues that despite the awfulness of one's past positions and actions, the answer to these two preceding questions is: among the Left. Very few people are born into radical politics, and almost no one holds the right views from the start, and so people need time to learn and grow. Sometimes it is a very longtime filled with egregious beliefs and behaviors—but if the Left is to ever be effective, it will be populated mainly by these kinds of people.¹

12. The first win (or loss) is only a beginning...

Sorry to Bother You ends with a victory of sorts. A small one. Without spoiling too much, the lesson here is that strikes, whether successful or not, can only ever be the start of a revolutionary movement. Same for protests. Protests in and of themselves are not going to bring down a government or a political-economic system. Strikes will not either. There is plenty of debate on the Left about whether a mass general strike could do that, but even with something as powerful as a general strike (which is really only practically imaginable with preliminary strikes and protests preceding it) it would be unlikely on its own to replace capitalism with socialism (or whatever your preferred label for a democratic, egalitarian form of postcapitalism is). Revolutionary transformation is not something that can be won or lost overnight, with one victory—nor can it be lost with one loss, by one strike that fails or never happens, by one protest that has low turnout or fails to motivate further actions. Hope is crucial, but it must be tempered by a realistic pessimism regarding the struggle ahead. There will be many loses and hopefully many more wins—but the struggle continues. Even if capitalism were successfully dismantled, what replaces it will also be an object of struggle, one that will require that we learn as much as we can from all the struggles that precedes it.

¹ Although she was writing about how socialists should deal with liberals at Women's Marches, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's writings served as crucial inspiration for this point. See: "Don't Shame the First Steps of a Resistance" in *Socialist Worker*, Jan. 24, 2017. Available online at: <https://socialistworker.org/2017/01/24/dont-shame-the-first-steps-of-a-resistance>.