

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 5

2023

The Liberal Ideology of Oppenheimer

Ronald W. Cox

Florida International University, coxr@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cox, Ronald W. (2023) "The Liberal Ideology of Oppenheimer," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol11/iss2/5>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Class, Race and Corporate Power* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

The Liberal Ideology of Oppenheimer

Abstract

The Oppenheimer film centers its narrative too closely to the great man myth of history. As a result, powerful themes such as the politics, economics and morality of the U.S. decision to use two atomic bombs in World War II are diluted by a rigid focus on a singular personality.

Keywords

Oppenheimer movie, review, politics, atomic bombs

I had conflicted feelings in anticipation of the recently released *Oppenheimer* film. On the one hand, I admired the book, *American Prometheus*, that the film was based on. Written by historians Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, the 721-page biography was a magisterial achievement that covered Oppenheimer from birth to death, contextualized by the insights of expert scholars who were able to frame the circumstances that shaped Oppenheimer. On the other hand, I have long felt that movie director Christopher Nolan's filmmaking was overrated. His directing has always exhibited a technical showmanship that too often eclipsed attention to character development.

The *Oppenheimer* film is a collision of the best of the book, which the director at times manages to capture within a sprawling arc of filmic biography, with the worst of Nolan—the technocratic flourishes often do not allow the viewer to get fully immersed in the characters, flattening too many scenes because of the expansive coverage of the breath of Oppenheimer's scientific life. At the same time, there is an energy in the presentation and the acting that makes it immersive in grappling with important political and existential questions: the threats posed to humanity by the creation and expansion of the atomic bomb and the witch-hunt mentality of the Cold War US establishment that seeks to punish any dissent from the orthodoxy of nuclear weapons expansion.

The best aspects of *Oppenheimer* are Nolan's depiction of the inquisition of the scientist by a three-member security panel assembled by the Atomic Energy Agency to interrogate Oppenheimer. At the time of the 1954 "hearing," Oppenheimer's security clearance had already been revoked by the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Lewis Strauss, brilliantly played by Robert Downey, Jr. Oppenheimer had asked for a hearing to establish a process whereby he would be able to defend himself from accusations that he was a Soviet spy, a baseless account largely manufactured by powerful and unaccountable political operatives led by William Liscum Borden, former executive director of Congress's Joint Atomic Energy Committee, the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Strauss himself.

Nolan's direction and script, heavily indebted to the book (Bird and Sherwin are listed as co-authors of the screenplay), is at its best in contrasting Oppenheimer's life with the manufactured witch-hunt orchestrated by key architects of the U.S. security establishment. The *Oppenheimer* film succeeds, within certain limitations, in providing a sense of how corrupt and unaccountable the U.S. national security establishment often was, even to one-time "national heroes" such as Oppenheimer. The "hearing" was an unbridled inquisition, in that Oppenheimer's lawyers, lacking security clearance, had no access to classified information used liberally to build a false case against the scientist, including the outlandish and unsupported charge that Oppenheimer was a "Soviet spy." This "finding" by the three-member security panel was used to justify a 2-1 ruling stripping Oppenheimer of his security clearance.

Despite powerful scenes of Cold War hysteria, *Oppenheimer* the movie limits audience awareness of the scope and scale of the Cold War witch-hunt. That's largely due to the extreme focus on Oppenheimer the individual, whose character is often so limited to the expressions and reactions of Oppenheimer himself (well-played by actor Cillian Murphy) that the larger systemic

causes and consequences of the nuclear arms buildup gets minimized. Nolan's choices to center almost every scene around an Oppenheimer reaction to events reduces the film to liberal individualism, whether intentionally or not. The limits of this approach are readily apparent in two crucially important scenes: the testing of the Atomic Bomb in the Alamogordo Bombing Range (125 miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico) and the use of the atomic bombs in Japan. In both cases, we see nuclear explosions through the eyes of Oppenheimer and his immediate scientific and military team, a choice which serves to remove from the frame the fact that atomic testing produced direct casualties from nuclear radiation on the surrounding New Mexico population. The costs and consequences of the New Mexico atomic tests were replicated in other locations, both in the U.S. and globally, and had severe consequences in many other locations to health and mortality. By 2022, the U.S. had conducted 1,054 atomic tests, costing more than \$100 billion.¹

The film, though, limits a broader understanding of the costs and consequences, and as such does not give the viewer a proper scope of the extent to which U.S. society was dominated by the one-sided viewpoint of the military-industrial complex. Instead, the contradictions of nuclear armament appear in simplified terms: as an existential morality play in the conscience of Oppenheimer himself, rather than a deep-seated power-structure that ran roughshod over dissent, creating a McCarthyist witch-hunt mentality that rewarded subservience, punished critics and was weaponized the most against workers, artists, intellectuals and dissidents, whose voices would be silenced in favor of the profit-making objectives of the military-industrial complex. We see reflected in Oppenheimer's eyes his vision of the horrific scope and scale of the weapon he has helped unleash against Japan, when he addresses a public audience who reveres him for helping to "win the war" against Japan. Oppenheimer plays to the audience in his speech, while the audience in the movie theatre only sees what Oppenheimer's imagination allows us to see, not what the Japanese actually experienced.

Nor do we get from the film the opposition to the use of the atomic bombs in Japan from a wide range of military Generals, including Dwight D. Eisenhower, Hap Arnold, Curtis LeMay, and Admirals Bill Leahy and even the notorious racist Admiral William "Bull" Halsey. All opposed the decisions to use atomic weapons for the simple reason that conventional bombings had already "brought Japan to its knees," according to Arnold and LeMay.² We now know, through the scholarship of Gar Alperovitz and others, and the release of classified documents, that the bomb was dropped for two reasons: first and foremost, to keep the Soviets from expanding their troop presence in Asia by sending a signal of U.S. power,³ and second, because the bomb was so exorbitantly funded. According to the work of Martin Sherwin: we dropped the bomb to provide a visible result of the sheer costs and magnitude of the resources devoted to this development of U.S. power.⁴ The use of the bomb was a demonstration of U.S. global militarism that prefigured

¹ Lesley M.M. Blume, "U.S. Nuclear Testing's Devastating Legacy Lingers, 30 Years After Moratorium," *National Geographic*, September 22, 2022.

² Ian W. Toll, "The Atomic Bombings," The National World War II Museum, August 8, 2020.

³ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, Vintage New Edition, 1996.

⁴ Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies*, Stanford University Press, 3rd Ed., 2003.

a large-scale military-industrial complex which followed profit motivations more closely than “national defense.”

The criticisms of this nuclear weapons expansion do surface in *Oppenheimer*, but are at best secondary and undeveloped next to Oppenheimer’s own existential crisis. The script does not do justice to most of the secondary characters, especially the women characters, who are treated as an afterthought, an appendage to Oppenheimer himself—most blatantly in a graphic depiction of Oppenheimer having sex with his former lover, Jean Tatlock, in his own imagination during the three-panel interrogation, in full view (in Oppenheimer’s guilty conscience) of his wife, Kitty Oppenheimer.

The scientists who oppose the further development and use of the atomic bomb are depicted briefly, but given short shrift and uneven, at best, character development. Albert Einstein as portrayed by Tom Conti emerges as a bit of a cartoon figure. The fact is Einstein did not request or get a security clearance; his politics of opposition to U.S. militarism and his socialism were made clear to the establishment as Einstein courageously spoke out against the consequences of succumbing to the national security establishment’s terms of subservience. To the movie’s credit, one of Einstein’s interactions with Oppenheimer produces a prophetic warning of the dangerous game that Oppenheimer has played: trying to change the system from within only to be sacrificed by the system for the sake of preparing the way for humanity’s imminent destruction.

The fact that Nolan is willing to push the outer limits of a liberal critique of the system by including Einstein’s prophetic warning to Oppenheimer is a strength of the movie. The fact that the script only allows the viewers to see the nuclear buildup through the eyes and consciousness of Oppenheimer himself is too often a weakness of the film’s liberal individualism, which fails to capture the systemic power of a growth of a military-industrial complex whose casualties go way beyond Oppenheimer himself. It’s gratifying to see a major Hollywood film and a prominent director tackle the existential crises of the production, development, and expansion of nuclear weapons. But it’s disappointing to see this reduced to a “great man” version of history.

Ultimately, I would marginally recommend seeing the movie, because it introduces viewers, however unevenly, to important existential questions about the costs and consequences of nuclear arms expansion. However, the film is far from sufficient in educating viewers about the larger political, economic, and social context that produced and dramatically expanded the deployment of nuclear weapons around the world. For that, viewers need a broader education that the movie *Oppenheimer* often cuts short.