

An exchange on *The Pursuit of Happyness*

28 February 2007

The following is a letters on the WSWWS review of the film The Pursuit of Happyness and a reply by the article's author, Joanne Laurier

In your recent review of *The Pursuit of Happyness* you correctly attack the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality of the film, but conclude that overall it “reveals the soul-wasting nature of poverty and the lack of prospects for those condemned to economic oblivion.” However, the reality of how the film is being used belies such a simple explanation. Several US cities have been providing free showings of the film to their homeless populations. (See “A Chance for City’s Homeless to Pursue ‘Happyness’” *Washington Post*”) These have been organized on the ridiculous idea that it will inspire the homeless to improve their lives. While the film does portray the plight of the homeless sympathetically, the main message is clearly that anyone can make it under capitalism, a message that I’m all too tired of hearing.

VL

23 February 2007

Dear VL,

Thank you for your remarks concerning my review of *The Pursuit of Happyness*. To begin with, the film is a flawed work and its weaknesses lend themselves to being exploited on behalf of various political agendas.

You disagree with my conclusion about the film because it is being used to encourage the homeless “to improve their lives.” You state that while “the film does portray the plight of the homeless sympathetically, the main message is clearly that anyone can make it under capitalism.”

The leading actor in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Will Smith, would not disagree with you. He claims in the film’s production notes that the movie reinforces the conception that this country is based on “the hope that any person, armed with their own will and determination, can create their life, can create their situation—from the lowest of the low to the highest of

the high.”

However, neither Smith’s pronouncements, nor the manner in which the film is being used, negate what the latter actually shows. As I wrote, “The backbreaking pursuit and realization of his [Will Smith’s Chris Gardner] goals point not to a society that offers great opportunities for the taking, but quite the opposite. *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrates that someone like Chris, particularly as an African American, may be lucky and skilled enough to attain success, but not before walking through fire and brimstone for the powers that be. He is the exception that proves the rule! What is the fate of those not so fortunate or skilled?”

In fact, the *Washington Post* article you linked to states that “*The Pursuit of Happyness* shows in sad and unnerving detail how quickly a family living from paycheck to paycheck can plunge into despair.” This, after telling us that the film’s “message of tenacity and resolve has struck many moviegoers—and some elected officials—as a powerful lesson in what it takes to succeed.”

And what does it take for Chris Gardner to succeed? Nearly superhuman efforts. For anyone thinking clearly, this is hardly an uplifting message about the present social system. That such contorted arguments are the best that can be advanced in defense of the “American Dream” points to how diminished the prospects are for wide layers of the population.

When US capitalism was confident in itself, entire social groups—immigrant, working class, racial minorities—were encouraged to believe that they could better their conditions; now this has been reduced to one fortunate individual in a thousand or more, something of a freak or a fluke, who nearly kills himself in the process.

Regardless of how the film is used by defenders of the system to browbeat the poor, it will not prove to be a very effective tool on this score.

Sincerely,

Joanne Laurier
26 February 2007



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