

An exchange on Michael Moore's Sicko

David Walsh
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A number of readers have written in to the WSWS expressing disagreement with the comment we posted on Michael Moore's new documentary film, *Sicko*. "Michael Moore's *Sicko*: very limited conceptions, very limited results".

The following letter perhaps best sums up these views:

Dear David Walsh:

I have not seen Sicko yet, but I thought your criticisms were off base.

Your main objection seems to be that Moore emphasized the mass entertainment aspect too much for your tastes, and underemphasized the larger social and historical context of the healthcare issue. Here is the problem: If Moore had made his film the way you suggest, it would have a tiny audience, rather than the millions who will watch and appreciate Sicko. The WSWS is excellent in substantive terms—but how many people read it every day? Compare that with the numbers that watch Moore's films ...

My entire adult life (and I suspect yours too) has been consumed with the simple question: When will the left come up with something that works? When will it find a formula that appeals to a genuinely mass audience in the USA? Watching Fahrenheit 9/11, I left with the impression that Moore may have finally done it. It appears Sicko will have a similar impact. Why be so vituperative in criticizing this success?

For what it is worth, I enjoy your reviews, and read them regularly.

Sincerely,

DG

11 July 2007

This letter raises a number of important questions related to the political situation in the US and the development of popular consciousness, as well as problems in filmmaking.

DG may not be aware of it, but I find it significant (and ironic) that he—and several other critics of the WSWS review, as a matter of fact—defends Moore and *Sicko* although he hasn't seen the film. What does this suggest? That he believes, and probably correctly, that one can gain a fairly accurate idea of its themes and approach minus an actual viewing.

At that point one is clearly speaking about something other than a significant work of art. A film, even a documentary, establishes its truth not as a series of formal concepts, summarized in a few sentences or images, but as a dramatic and intellectual experience. Serious filmmakers struggle with their material and *in some fashion* the viewer reproduces that effort in watching the final product and responding to its challenges.

Moore's film, DG implies, is something else, essentially the "left" lowest common denominator. And he's right in that. We know more or less what we will see and hear before we take our seats.

But how could such a film have a deep impact? In fact, I think there is less challenging material in *Sicko* than in some of Moore's previous efforts, for example, *Roger & Me* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with all their weaknesses. And, as far as I understand, it has not had the same impact as those films, at the box office or anywhere else.

This has to do both with the content and the form of his work.

The assumption of Moore, and the assumption of some of our critics, is that a film must make matters simple for the American public either to

gain a wide audience or have a significant influence. We reject this notion. In fact, we think the opposite is the case.

No one at the WSWS idealizes the present level of consciousness; we are well aware of the political difficulties that exist. Unfortunately, those who adapt themselves, or half-adapt themselves, to the present state of confusion very rarely want to consider its historical background or their own role in perpetuating it. They say, 'People have very little knowledge about politics or history, so we have to tailor our arguments to what people will currently accept.' If no one tells the public the truth, and very few have in America in recent decades, then how is it to learn anything?

DG says, "My entire adult life (and I suspect yours too) has been consumed with the simple question: When will the left come up with something that works? When will it find a formula that appeals to a genuinely mass audience in the USA?" That isn't how we see it at all. The development of a mass left-wing movement in the US is not a matter of finding something, as every garden variety pragmatist would argue, "that works." It is, first and foremost, a question of the maturity of the crisis of American and world capitalism. The task of Marxists is to engage in a struggle to raise political and cultural consciousness, confident that such a struggle will meet, under certain conditions, with a massive popular response.

Moore's continued prominence, frankly, is itself an expression of the political immaturity of wide layers of the population, including its "left" elements.

Honestly, which aspects of Moore's film genuinely rise above the level of individual segments aired on CBS' "60 Minutes" or other similar television programs, done every week and sometimes more effectively? Much of *Sicko* has that quality, of an extended broadcast news item, with a "left" or populist twist.

For example, another of our reader-critics, JW, asserts that "there are several points that the film makes that are stunning" and includes under this category the scene of for-profit hospital patients "taken by cab to the downtown [Los Angeles] 'skid row' area, and dumped still wearing thin hospital gowns and no shoes!"

In fact, on July 13 CNN broadcast an extended item on this practice, noting pointedly that it had been covering the story for "two years." The cable channel may have felt incentive to promote its coverage of the hospitals' malfeasance as a result of *Sicko*'s release, but this merely underscores the essential point: exposés of this variety, which fail to trace social atrocities to their general source in capitalism and the continued disenfranchisement of the working class within the two-party system, are not unusual, certainly not "stunning," and represent no threat *by themselves* to the status quo.

Why are our critics so certain that American audiences could not have understood something more complicated? Why do they ask so little? Moore spends a few misleading minutes on history in *Sicko*, blaming Richard Nixon for the present state of healthcare and referring to Ronald Reagan's role in the anti-"socialized medicine" campaign of the Cold War years.

The US has powerful political and ideological traditions. The revolutionary democratic ideas of Tom Paine and others swept the

colonies in 1776. The number of copies distributed of Paine's *Common Sense* is a matter of controversy, but it apparently totaled at least 150,000 (and perhaps as many as 600,000), within a population of only a few million colonists. In the 1850s, which also witnessed an American Renaissance in literature (Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne, Thoreau and others), the US population found itself riveted by complex political and constitutional issues.

Historian James McPherson, in an interview with the WSWS in 2003 (See "A conversation with historian James M. McPherson"), noted that during the famed 1858 campaign between Democrat Stephen Douglas and Republican Abraham Lincoln, candidates for the US Senate in Illinois, "People traveled miles and waited for hours to hear the debates [each of which lasted at least three hours], on critical political issues. The population was aware of the issues, there was great political interest and intensity. Big ideas were advanced, and policies arose from these big ideas."

The muckrakers of the Progressive Era, including Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*); novelists like Dreiser, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Hemingway; commentators like Mencken—all of these figures, and many more, had wide audiences for substantial and artistically presented conceptions.

Is the American population now stupid and indifferent? If our critics think so, they should say as much and explain how this has happened.

Moore is a filmmaker, who has demonstrated a degree of courage and independence in the past. He has showed a certain commitment to the working class population and attempts to picture its difficulties.

Politically, however, Moore belongs to the liberal left in the US, whose aversion to theory, political laziness and unseriousness are among the factors hindering a genuine mass political development. Such people always excuse themselves by blaming the population. "They" would be "ready" to break with the Democrats, of course, but the "people" aren't. "They" are for very "radical" policies, but Americans are so "backward." "They" are even "socialists," in the privacy of their own homes, but the so-called "S" word is "unmentionable" in the US. Such people fail to see that their own half-heartedness and fear of principled struggle play an objective role in helping to prop up the existing political set-up.

Grasping the present problems in social consciousness requires, among other things, a historical evaluation of the role of the various parties and organizations that have claimed in some way to represent the interests of broad layers of the population: the trade unions, American liberalism, the civil rights leadership. This is not the place for such an evaluation, but we are convinced that any objective observer would conclude that the US population has been abandoned to the tender mercies of a rapacious ruling elite by all of these social elements, which have moved sharply to the right.

It is, one must repeat, verging on the dishonest of Moore to treat the question of healthcare without any reference to the refusal of the Democratic Party in the 1940s (under Roosevelt and Truman), at its social reformist height, to enact deep-going social measures. The eager participation of the AFL and CIO bureaucracies in the purging of socialist and left-wing forces during the McCarthy era meant the subsequent political strangulation of the labor movement and its unwavering commitment to pro-capitalist policies. It is impossible to understand the absence of universal healthcare in the US or struggle for such a measure today without considering these historical issues. Moore chose not to discuss any of this.

In a friendly review of *Sicko* in the *Nation* magazine, Christopher Hayes writes that "*Sicko* is different from Moore's last two efforts. Not just because of an absence of gimmicky gotcha moments, or a reduction in screen time for Moore himself, but because its topic isn't fundamentally polarizing in the way his previous works were.... Moore's solution is simple: Get rid of the health insurance companies. Don't just tinker with the healthcare system, banish profit from the delivery of healthcare

altogether. Socialize it. Make it a public good."

Moore proposes "simple," easy, unchallenging answers to extremely complex questions. He advocates alleviating the healthcare crisis in America while leaving untouched the foundations of the profit system, through the medium of the Democratic Party. This "practical," "realistic" approach is the most fantastic and deluded. The Democrats represent the corporate-financial elite. For holidays and election campaigns they mobilize a few populist phrases and arguments.

Moore has associated himself, critically or otherwise, with the various healthcare plans advanced by the leading 2008 Democratic presidential hopefuls, while acknowledging that former vice president Al Gore, who has yet to announce his entrance into the race, is the candidate closest to his heart. Let's not forget that in 2004 Moore initially supported retired General Wesley Clark, commander of the NATO bombing campaign during the brutal Kosovo War in 1999, in the Democratic Party presidential nomination process.

Why, contrary to our critics, should we be grateful for small mercies, such as *Sicko*'s attack on the private insurance carriers? One of our critics, RL, argues that "You don't try to fight the greed-ridden nature of privatized medicine for profit with nuanced intellectual analysis, which, of course, has its place." Then with what? Vague populism, which remains attached to the Democratic Party? With vulgar and, to be blunt, inaccurate depictions of the Canadian and European healthcare systems? What would be the reaction of Moore and our reader-critics to slashing, left-wing exposés by Canadian and European filmmakers of the healthcare systems in their countries? Would they argue that such things are "unhelpful" and that the critics should keep their mouths shut because the stupid Americans might be confused otherwise?

On the contrary, we believe the population needs far more, ten times more, "nuanced intellectual analysis." There is hardly anything in such short supply in America, and the political, social and cultural consequences of its absence should be clear for everyone to see.

The development of a broadly based socialist movement in the US and globally depends on the cultivation of complicated ideas among masses of people. Simplification, "dumbing down," even "left mythologizing," help no one. As the noted French left-wing writer Daniel Guerin explained in the 1930s in *Fascism and Big Business*, unlike the extreme right, socialism "appeals more to intelligence and reason than to the senses and imagination. Socialism does not impose a faith to be accepted without discussion; it presents a rational criticism of the capitalist system and requires of everybody, before his adherence, a personal effort of reason and judgment. It appeals more to the brain than to the eye or the nerves; it seeks to convince the reader or listener calmly, not to seize him, move him, and hypnotize him."

Moore is indulging in a variety of left-wing tabloid journalism, for which a number of commentators have commended him.

Jonathan Cohn, writing in the *New Republic*, observes: "I spotted plenty of intellectual dishonesties and arguments without context—enough, surely, to keep right-wing truth squads (and some left-wing ones) busy for weeks.... Still, by the time the final credits ran, it was hard to get too worked up about all of that. Because, beyond all the grandstanding and political theater, the movie actually made a compelling, argument about what's wrong with US healthcare and how to fix it. *Sicko* got a lot of the little things wrong. But it got most of the big things right."

Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page is even more explicit: "It's hard for the public to make an intelligent choice when only one side's view gets the big megaphone. Moore evens things up a bit. He uses the same big-screen pop culture that brings us Paris Hilton and 'American Idol' to summon our eyeballs to something truly valuable: a vision of how much better America's healthcare system could be."

There is a relation between form and content. The sloppiness and inaccuracy of Moore's film speaks to the half-baked conceptions behind

it. Critics like Cohn, from the right-wing, anticommunist *New Republic*, approve of *Sicko* because the film neither fundamentally challenges the economic and political status quo nor seeks to elevate the American population in a profound way. For the same reason, the film has been hailed by sections of the Democratic Party and Moore has been feted by a host of charlatans, Rep. Dennis Kucinich among them.

Is *Sicko* an enduring and important work of art? American cinema has produced extraordinary works, socially probing and artistically complex. In the 1930s and 1940s, and even beyond, filmmakers influenced by socialist ideas, Orson Welles and others, offered serious pictures of life within the limited confines of the studio system.

What indication is there that Moore has paid the slightest attention to the history of his art form? His flair, his willingness to ask embarrassing questions, his opposition to the biggest corporate and political villains have sometimes made it possible to overlook his artistic failings. There were genuinely affecting segments of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and such moments are not lacking in *Sicko*, but, in the long run, the weaknesses far outweigh the strengths. And the truth is that popular opinion has largely caught up to and surpassed Moore. He is not telling anyone very much that he or she doesn't know by now. On the contrary, he is beginning to belabor the obvious, which is always a dangerous sign.

Sicko is a poorly constructed film. A series of loosely strung together sequences, it has no central thrust or impulse. Moore points his camera in one direction or another, and sometimes gets it right. He relies on his political instincts and his ability to improvise. Those qualities have sometimes yielded valuable material, but they have their definite limitations. Those limitations have been reached. Moore could only advance by deepening his analysis of contemporary life.

The film relies, as we noted in the original review, on personal anecdote. Why couldn't a right-wing director make a film composed of interviews with thoroughly satisfied health insurance company clients in the US and thoroughly dissatisfied Europeans and Canadians? What would that prove?

Crudity is never excusable. "A pockmarked art," it was pointed out many years ago, "is no art and is therefore not necessary to the working masses. Those who believe in a 'pock-marked' art are imbued to a considerable extent with contempt for the masses" (Trotsky).

And there is a specific history of documentary filmmaking, both American and international. Is Moore familiar with the work of Robert Flaherty, or the "Direct Cinema" of Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles and Frederick Wiseman? Not for the sake of his personal edification, but to render his images more precise and elegant. Form has an impact on content. If Moore began with a serious approach to cinema he could not be satisfied with such careless and sometimes manipulative results.

DG writes that "If Moore had made his film the way you suggest, it would have a tiny audience, rather than the millions who will watch and appreciate *Sicko*. The WSWS is excellent in substantive terms—but how many people read it every day? Compare that with the numbers that watch Moore's films ..."

A different, more challenging film might have reached a smaller audience, but if it provided genuine direction, depth, its impact would, in the end, have been far greater. Muddy, quasi-socialist, populist notions will rally around them a vague, unclear and unfocused political movement that the Democratic Party will have no difficulty in bringing under its sway. The WSWS has a different conception and perspective.





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