A further exchange: Sicko and American politics and cinema

25 July 2007

Dear David Walsh,

I agree with many of your comments regarding the movie *Sicko* and particularly when you rightly criticized the scene where Moore apparently blamed the entire reason America has a privatized insurance scheme on Richard Nixon. However, I also feel, and this is a common current I have in reading most of the WSWS reviews, that you are too harsh and fail to take into account many of the positive aspects of the film that, while they may not be everything you or I want, they do lead to room for a greater, deeper critique that may raise consciousness.

For instance, how many movies out there, in mainstream American theater today, could you have the kind of conversation you and I are having today about something as important as changing the American healthcare system? How many other movies standing right next to *Sicko* as viewing options have absolutely zero intellectual value, where discussions such as this would be remote and next to impossible?

Some of the more positive moments in the film that went unmentioned was his refusal to shy behind the word "Socialized"; he took it head-on and even pointed out some of the socialistic practices that continue in America to this day. The scene where Cuban and American workers work and learn from one another, in a spirit of internationalism that leaves room for what can happen in this small piece of internationalist cooperation and could be extended, on a much greater scale, all over the globe. Finally, where he, after praising Hillary Clinton's healthcare plan (yes, way over the top), then castigates her as being one of the top recipients of campaign contributions from private healthcare companies. Moore makes it appear that she sold out, and although this is not stated outright in the film, I don't think it would be reading too much between the lines to come to the conclusion that not just Hillary Clinton but the entire Democratic Party has sold out as well.

I think Moore deserves a degree of credit for his movies for providing that opening for further discussion, further criticism, and, yes, a deeper analysis of the issue at hand. Moore opens the door to a major problem and introduces the issue, but as you and others point out, does not always go as deep or as meaningful as you (or I) would like. However, that perhaps could be the responsibility of the audience to do so or a politically conscious artist watching the film to make a better film if the desire is there.

Which brings me to another point I read from you in your exchange with another reader over *Sicko*, that you deny that the American general public has been "dumbed down." If not, then how do you explain the litany of (what you and I would both agree are) brain-dead movies with no intellectual value making huge amounts of money at the box office? How is this explained if the American public is so desperate for thought-provoking intellectual films? Why aren't any of the movies that you or your website view favorably making any significant headway at the box office? You claim that perhaps more honest movies would make less money at the box office but raise a higher consciousness; if this is so, then which movie of the last 10, 15 years would you say has produced that high level of consciousness and actively helped to change American opinion, in a real and tangible manner?

I would like to think as you do that the American public is yearning for movies of a greater intellectual intensity and passion, but after seeing which movies year in and year out remain at the top of the box office—banal, trite movies like *Die Hard 3*, *Fantastic Four*, *Transformers*, *Pirates of the Caribbean 3*, *Evan Almighty* (the list goes on but mercifully I'll stop here)—it makes me doubt whether this is truly the situation.

I enjoy reading much of the material here at the WSWS, but I would politely encourage some of the movie reviewers to be a little less harsh about some of the left-liberal movies that while admittedly are flawed, do not have a revolutionary socialist message and do not contain that higher-level analysis that is needed, at least provide the opening for viewers to, on their own, attain that higher consciousness through discussion and research with others, if the desire is there to do so.

P.S. Also in the exchange, I remember you attacked your critics for being "pragmatic." I found this somewhat strange; were not Marx and Lenin pragmatic socialists? Never afraid to use the reformist structures of the bourgeois to the advantage of the working class even if it did not necessarily yield the final goal of socialism by doing so? A la Marx's involvement with the British trade unions, endorsing Lincoln for President, endorsing the Paris Commune, which was not controlled primarily by communists or socialists. And Lenin's pragmatism is well known; some socialists and anarchists even call it "ultra pragmatism"—for instance, when Lenin made peace with the German government instead of waiting and encouraging the German workers to rebel and fight against it, and, of course, the New Economic Policy, which opened up the country to private enterprise and re-instituted capitalism in Russia.

GC

16 July

Dear GC,

Your letter is built around a contradiction. You write: "I think Moore deserves a degree of credit for his movies for providing that opening for further discussion, further criticism, and, yes, a deeper analysis of the issue at hand." Yet when the WSWS does precisely that, offering "further discussion" and "further criticism," you react with a considerable degree of irritation. In fact, it seems, you don't want *our* kind of discussion and criticism at all.

You argue that our review of *Sicko*, along with those of other "left-liberal movies" (I'm not certain which you have in mind), is too "harsh"; another reader termed the comment on *Sicko* "vituperative." We are speaking about serious social questions here, above all, the type of movement that needs to be built in opposition to American capitalism in crisis. If we can't speak plainly and honestly, nothing of any value will come out of this. We give Moore his due, and then we explain where we think his big weaknesses lie. We are highly critical. How else can one approach these matters? Why should he be a sacred cow?

You sidestep most of the points I made in the last published exchange, about the film's sloppiness and inaccuracies; about the approval it has

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received from sections of the media and the Democratic Party; about its refusal to treat complex historical and social problems; about its use of personal anecdote as a method of analysis; about its failure to go much beyond the efforts of network television "exposé" programs such as "60 Minutes"; about its tabloid approach to social issues.

And what about the Canadian and European healthcare systems? If Moore had made a film that argued, "In these countries certain steps were taken, as a result of labor struggles of the past, but now gains in health care and social programs are threatened there too, as part of a global process," that would have been one thing. But he *falsified* the situation in those countries, in the name, presumably, of simplifying matters and convincing American audiences. He sought out Tony Benn, a decrepit representative of the more-than-decrepit British reformism, who doesn't and *can't* speak honestly about the Labour Party or the state of the National Health Service in Britain. How can all this possibly help anyone? There is a certain crude kind of argumentation at work. And crude methods produce crude results.

The same type of argumentation, "Of course, it's inadequate, but at least...," after all, is made about the Democratic Party. Why can't you say the same thing about former Senator John Edwards as you do about Moore? "I don't share all his views, but at least he's raising the issue of social class in America...." If you don't say this, believe me, many others do.

"At least he..." "Well, yes, but..." Where does this end? If you add up all the "*At least he...*"s and "*Well, yes, but...*"s, you get the politics of the *Nation* magazine, which is already preparing to support the candidacy of Hillary Clinton if she wins the Democratic Party nomination. The editors of the *Nation* will come up with the requisite alibis, justifications and rationales—that is their specialty, as leading voices of the liberal left milieu.

We don't condemn Moore's moviemaking because of his continued orientation to the Democrats. Individuals with worse politics can still make important films. (Nor do we reject anyone because his or her film doesn't "have a revolutionary socialist message"—where did you ever read such a thing on the WSWS?)

We reject the lazy populism, the unseriousness, the anti-intellectualism, while we certainly take note of the coincidence that Moore continues to support the Democrats.

And we criticize the artistic failings. None of our critics want to discuss that either. There's something slipshod and amateurish about Moore's filmmaking. (His only foray into fiction, *Canadian Bacon*, was, frankly, pretty dreadful.) Why should we be satisfied with that? The American film industry has made great films in the past, including documentaries. Moore could do better work, if he thought about things more precisely and thoroughly, if he studied history and society, if he studied the history of his art form. He's not obliged to do any of that, but then we don't feel obliged to give him a pass.

You write: "Which brings me to another point I read from you in your exchange with another reader over *Sicko*, that you deny that the American general public has been 'dumbed down.' If not, then how do you explain the litany of (what you and I would both agree are) brain-dead movies with no intellectual value making huge amounts of money at the box office?"

You missed my point. I never denied that there were problems in popular thinking or that there has been a decline in class consciousness. We approach this question quite forthrightly on the WSWS all the time. The difficulties and traumas of the twentieth century—the degeneration and demise of the USSR under Stalinism, the decay of the labor movement and traditional workers' organizations everywhere, the relatively free hand the ruling elites have had to enforce their social policies and encourage every form of ideological poison—all of this has had an impact.

However, we examine these problems concretely, indicting the parties, tendencies and bureaucracies historically responsible for this situation. We insist a change has to take place and we don't adapt ourselves to prevailing moods, but we don't blame the working class for what has been done to its consciousness and its social position.

You continue: "How is this explained if the American public is so desperate for thought-provoking intellectual films? Why aren't any of the movies that you or your website view favorably making any significant headway at the box office? You claim that perhaps more honest movies would make less money at the box office but raise a higher consciousness; if this is so, then which movie of the last 10, 15 years would you say has produced that high level of consciousness and actively helped to change American opinion, in a real and tangible manner?"

This is just cynicism and resignation. On that basis, why bother at all? No one responds to anything, the population is content with the current fare. That a series of inane films makes money tells us far less about the American population, frankly, than it does about a culture at the end of its rope.

The alternative to this sort of pessimism is not painting imaginary pictures, but in grasping the underlying currents at work, which will *break up* the present stagnation, and encouraging the emergence of clear-sighted, complex, artistic films and other works.

In all honesty, I think you're speaking less in defense of Moore than in defense of a certain approach to politics and culture, which involves bending in the breeze. You don't make enough demands on Moore, in my opinion, because you don't make enough demands on yourself.

The problem with Moore is that he has certain preconceptions about the American population and he decides in advance *what he thinks* people will and won't accept. That's not the same thing as the relentless pursuit of artistic truth.

As for the supposed "pragmatism" of Marxists of the past, you misunderstand the issue. Pragmatism is a strand of modern bourgeois thought, with particularly strong roots and influence in the United States. Pragmatism calls into question the primacy of matter over thought and dissolves the objectivity of reality into the subjective category of "experience." In any event, in this context, we're not speaking about the defenders of philosophical pragmatism, but the advocates of vulgar opportunism ("Whatever works...").

You refer to a series of historical episodes, which are far too complicated and heterogeneous to discuss in detail in the body of this reply. In general, however, you mix up flexibility in tactics—always grounded in the firmest adherence to principles and to advancing, under various historical circumstances, the long-term, independent interests of the working class—with "pragmatism," which inevitably sacrifices those long-term interests to more immediate gains.

Yours sincerely,
David Walsh

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