

Based on a Jack London short story

The Minions of Midas: The making of a certain social type

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9 January 2021

The Minions of Midas (*Los favoritos de Midas*) is a six-part miniseries from Spain, inspired by a 1901 Jack London short story. The series is a Netflix production.

In the drama's favor, one must say, first of all, that it is unmistakably *of our day*: riots in the streets, political and financial secrets concealed from the population, endless, antidemocratic machinations at the top of society.

In contemporary Madrid, Victor Genovés (Luis Tosar) is the chief executive of a large conglomerate, the Malvar Group, a position he recently inherited—unexpectedly—from its founder.

Genovés begins receiving messages from an organization calling itself “The Minions of Midas,” demanding a payment of 50 million euros. (King Midas, in Greek mythology, gained the ability to turn everything he touched into gold. As a result, in certain legends, he starved to death.) The letter writers explain that they bear Victor “no ill will,” they are simply “businessmen.”

Messages, they say, will regularly be sent to him. For each refusal to pay, an entirely innocent person, chosen at random, will be killed at a specific time and place. And, accordingly, individuals begin to die on schedule, although each death may be explained away as an accident.

One of Malvar's properties is a liberal newspaper, *El Observador Nacional*. A journalist on the paper, Mónica Báez (Marta Belmonte), has broken a story about a corrupt deal between a prominent Spanish bank, which also has financial connections with the newspaper, and the Syrian government. Victor's decision to allow the article to be published triggers an effort to remove him as Malvar's CEO. A somewhat reluctant and even accidental business mogul, one with a moral compass, Genovés gets to know and becomes involved with Mónica.

He eventually contacts the police, who initiate an investigation, led by the conscientious, tireless Inspector Conte (Guillermo Toledo), into the Minions' extortion efforts. The latter, however, seem almost unstoppable. They foresee and prevail against the various police operations aimed at their exposure and capture. Innocent men and women continue to die.

The Minions express concern for Victor, even protectiveness.

“We would never hurt you or yours.” When board members threaten to ally against him, the shadowy outfit provides Victor discrediting information about one of his opponents, forcing the man to support Genovés in a showdown vote.

Meanwhile, what the media terms the “Spanish Revolt” is taking place on the streets of Madrid and elsewhere. Battles between demonstrators and police are nearly a daily occurrence. An upcoming European summit is expected to be the scene of mass and presumably violent protests.

The Minions ask Victor in one of their missives, “Do you still think you can defeat us? Who will survive?” They claim to be “the natural culmination of the order you accept... the inevitable... the future.”

When Victor reveals all to Mónica, it naturally creates a rift. She wants to make the facts of the case public, but he argues, “A millionaire lets people die to keep his money, that's how people would see it. They'd crucify me.”

An attempt to pay an installment of five million euros and trace the money ends in disaster. A glamorous but coldblooded competitor, María José (Marta Milans), offers a hedonistic alternative, even as she proposes her company buy Malvar—“Enjoy, my friend, while the party lasts.”

The Madrid police investigation of the Minions is taken over by national intelligence, whose officials promptly inform Victor they are dropping the case. “The state can't take care of everything.” The former lead cop tells him, “You're on your own.” Victor receives another message from his tormentors, “Are you capable of dying for your money?”

The reader not interested in finding out how things turn out, in general terms, should now avert his or her eyes.

One might say that the Marxist maxim, force not only conquers, it convinces, wins the day. The desire to protect property and wealth vanquishes every misgiving. Victor makes a series of cynical, even brutal decisions, and throws various people, including Mónica, to the wolves. He becomes not merely a “disciple” of Midas, as the group approvingly points out to him, but “one of its Minions.” He takes his place as part of the order he insisted all along he was rebelling against. Great things apparently lie in store for him.

The Minions of Midas has intriguing and perceptive elements. Its portrait of the Spanish upper echelon is not flattering. Like their counterparts everywhere, the various fictional corporate executives, bankers and politicians who appear in the series, existing in a separate, privileged universe, ruthlessly pursue their (often conflicting) interests with disregard for the mass of the population, while doing everything in their power to hide that harsh reality. Those who oppose this pursuit either end up capitulating to it or become its victims.

Great wealth brings with it a vulnerability, especially, as in this case, if one has a conscience. The filmmakers tackle this issue seriously, without, it seems, determining its outcome in advance, or assuming that the given individual is a mere slave to his immediate economic interests. Victor, one feels, genuinely wrestles with the issue. He sobs even as he betrays Mónica horribly. Nonetheless, those interests cruelly, implacably hold sway.

The series is less successful in other ways. References to the Syrian regime these days always amount to an expression of solidarity with the layer of middle-class advocates of “human rights imperialism,” who attempt to use the pretext of Assad’s crimes to justify even greater and bloodier ones.

In fact, the Spanish ruling class has eagerly participated, to the extent of its ability and in the face of widespread opposition, in various neocolonial wars and interventions in recent decades—in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, Libya and various African nations. Significantly, in 2017, as the WSWs pointed out, it closed “ranks behind Washington’s [the Trump administration’s] attack on Syria.”

In line with that, Mónica’s character suffers at times from an overdose of liberal piety and sanctimony, the sort of crusading reporter who picks and chooses which injustices to investigate and somehow always misses those closest to home, including the conditions of the working class and the poor in his or her own country. Indeed, the journalist seems quite prepared to accept Victor’s immense wealth, as long as there are no crimes directly or immediately attached to it. Marta Belmonte does better in the scenes with her opinionated, down-to-earth mother. Tosar, who seems almost ubiquitous in Spanish film and television at present, is fine in a role that doesn’t always quite cohere.

The Jack London story, only a few pages long, serves as an intriguing jumping-off point. London created something in the style of a 19th century detective tale, with shades of Arthur Conan Doyle or Robert Louis Stevenson. His “Minions of Midas” introduce themselves as quasi-Nietzschean “members of that intellectual proletariat” with “no foolish ethical nor social scruples.”

Envy the capitalist “Money Baronage” and determining that the right of the individual to hold property always rests, in the final analysis, solely and wholly upon might, London’s Minions explain that as wage slaves, “toiling early and late, and living abstemiously, we could not save in threescore years—nor

in twenty times threescore years—a sum of money sufficient successfully to cope with the great aggregations of massed capital which now exist. Nevertheless, we have entered the arena. We now throw down the gage to the capital of the world. Whether it wishes to fight or not, it shall have to fight.” Capitalism has generated from its midst a deadly, violent terroristic opposition, a breed of violent “supermen.”

In an interview with *Variety*, writer-director Mateo Gil commented that London’s piece was “a kind of warning about this monster that is gestating within capitalism, a cancer that is already inside us and must be treated. It discusses our relationship with money and property. Property is a curious concept that is very rarely spoken about. It’s as if, since the fall of communism, there is an intellectual modesty which keeps us from discussing ownership.” He went on, “From there, it got me thinking about our responsibility for the crimes committed so that we can live with the wealth we have.”

Gil further explained that the 2008 financial crisis contributed to the series being made: “The crisis changed a lot of perceptions about the world we live in and our relationship with wealth. There was a sense of injustice in the distribution of wealth, and I play with things in this series that are better reflected by the reality we are living in today.”

One might reasonably argue that *The Minions of Midas* is unnecessarily long at 5 hours and 16 minutes, that there are dull patches and characters schematically or abstractly drawn, that the nature and evolution of the “Spanish Revolt” against social inequality in particular never receives serious treatment. This would all be true, but the series nonetheless holds interest throughout and appears animated by genuine social awareness and concern.



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