

The Simpson murder case: Imitation of life

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14 April 2024

This comment was published in the International Workers Bulletin on July 4, 1994.

There is an unreal quality to contemporary American life which is epitomized by the O.J. Simpson affair. On June 17 police pursued one of the most recognizable sports and media figures in the country, who reportedly had a gun to his head, 60 miles along southern California freeways to his home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles. Some 95 million people watched the spectacle on television. A swarm of media helicopters hovered over the bizarre motorcade. Many along the route cheered Simpson on or held up signs expressing support.

This extraordinary scene contained the three elements of the affair which stand out more than any other: Simpson himself—his marketed image versus the reality; the enormous fascination that the lives of celebrities, irrespective of their specific talents or specialties, hold for great masses of people; and the media exploitation of this and every other tragedy.

In this society, success in any endeavor is identified not with its intrinsic value or the personal satisfaction it brings, but with the accumulation of wealth and status. The concrete, qualitative side of an activity, whether it be playing football or anything else, loses significance; it becomes merely a means to an end.

Simpson, in an interview, put it very succinctly: “When I was a kid, Willie Mays was my hero. Not because he was a good baseball player. But because he had a big house.” As far as one can tell, Simpson developed at an early age an image of what success in America meant and set out to accumulate the objects and relationships which would fulfill that image.

Simpson rose in the world through playing football. Great athletes demonstrate admirable qualities—courage, resilience, even nobility—which are to a large extent the product of self-discipline, natural physical ability and the development through practice

of certain muscles. The “genius” that an athlete displays may remain in a sense external to the core of the man himself. He may not reveal any of those admirable characteristics in his day-to-day life.

But athletic competition under capitalism plays a significant role. The successful athlete becomes a walking advertisement for the system and the nation. The sports figure becomes a vessel—in Simpson’s case, a clearly willing vessel—for the propagation of all sorts of values, as well as the sale of all sorts of products, which may or may not have anything to do with his own personality or desires.

Simpson was turned into an object. He became the smiling face, the rental car spokesman, the genial performer. Of course, the actual human being is the first victim of this objectification. In another interview, he said, “You realize if you’re living an image, you’re just not living.”

A great deal in Simpson’s existence was false. He clearly led a double life, of one sort or another. His record of violent attacks against his former wife is now well-known. The events of the past few weeks have demonstrated that the public image of the individual celebrity is as much at variance with reality as is the ruling class picture of American society as a whole—prosperous, democratic, full of opportunity—with the actual state of affairs.

But the fate of Simpson and his ex-wife is only one side of the equation. Why does this case become an event which dominates the national news? The media, controlled entirely by corporate interests, builds the case up in a grotesque fashion for their own purposes, both financial and ideological. Their aim is to sell newspapers and air-time, and at the same time fix the public’s attention on the trials and tribulations of individual celebrities, thereby diverting attention from social problems.

But media manipulation by itself does not explain the

widespread fascination with the “rich and famous.” Why do so many people crave information about celebrities? Magazines, television programs, entire cable networks exist for no other purpose than to provide such material.

It seems paradoxical on the surface. A retrogression in the lives of millions is taking place—deteriorating living standards, spousal abuse, child abuse, drugs, etc. Yet not in decades has there been such official glorification of wealth, power and status. And it’s undeniable that large sections of the population are swept up in this.

In the media, the layer of the population considered worthy of attention grows ever more restricted. Millionaire politicians, corporate executives, entertainers, sports stars, fashion design models—these are the people whose lives “count.” To a large extent, from the point of view of official society, working people don’t have real lives.

The genuine traumas of millions are considered purely individual difficulties, if they are acknowledged at all, and not of general interest. And this is accepted unthinkingly by many workers themselves.

The key to the paradox lies in the fact that there is today no mass movement towards a liberating and progressive social goal that would grip masses of people, bind them together and give a purpose in their lives beyond the immediate struggle for survival. Such a movement could only be the struggle to replace the capitalist order with a humane socialist society.

A social force does exist which is impelled by its role in the process of production into a struggle against the existing order, that is the working class. But the working class at present is held in check by the bankruptcy of its leadership.

In the absence of a mass movement which could provide such social “cement,” rampant individualism, as opposed to genuine individuality, reigns. Instead of solidarity, it’s every man for himself. The vicarious fascination with the lives of celebrities breeds in such an impoverished atmosphere.

The more one considers the entire sorry business, the more it becomes evident that the O.J. Simpson affair, in all its aspects, could only take place within a diseased society. Whatever official public opinion pretends, social relations in this country have reached a desperate state. These dehumanized relations arise out of the

crisis of capitalism, an outmoded system which has led millions of people into a blind alley.



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