

# Roger and me critique history essay



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\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Economic Regimes](#) \n \t
2. [Contradictions](#) \n \t
3. [General Motors Today vs. 1980's](#) \n \t
4. [General Motors in a Capitalist Society](#) \n \t
5. [General Motors In Canada](#) \n \t
6. [General Motors in Twenty Years](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

“ Roger and Me” by Michael Moore was his first documentary and the start of his infamous biased and controversial trend. He spends the whole film being a nuisance and tries to portray General Motors and Roger Smith as the antagonists. This documentary revolves around the change of Flint, Michigan’s prosperous economy to the current poverty stricken state due to the relocation of 11 GM factories. Michael Moore tells the story from an extreme socialist point of view as if it was an unethical, inhumane, illegal act that GM did by relocating plants to stay competitive in their industry. It may have not been the smartest business decision, but for a short-term agenda, it made sense. Michael Moore tried to do anything to have a meeting with GM’s CEO, Roger Smith, and was shocked when Roger Smith wouldn’t. Is it really that surprising that an enormous company doesn’t want their CEO talking to a hometown hero filmmaker in case things are manipulated (which Michael Moore always does)? The problem that left Flint poverty stricken was that they solely relied on General Motors for economic health and the economic regimes and social systems in place only made things worse.

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## **Economic Regimes**

General Motors closed 11 plants in Flint, Michigan and moved them to Mexico to stay more competitive. Mexican workers cost less than American workers, land is cheaper in Mexico, and workers compensation in Mexico is cheaper, therefore generating less expenses for GM by moving their factories. The problem in Flint was that everyone worked at a GM plant. It was the only lifestyle besides being a political figure or government employee. According to Marxist theory General Motors would be the bourgeoisie. They had the power to decide if Flint stays prosperous, or vanishes in poverty. General Motors in Flint was more important than the government because General Motors essentially was Flint's economy. There was nothing to fall back on, and as seen through " Roger and Me", Flint became a ghost town. If GM was the bourgeoisie, that made all the factory workers the proletariat. By definition a proletariat (or working class) was the lower class that did not own their own means of production and relied on selling their labour power. The only way citizens of Flint could make a living was by providing their labour, which was too pricey for GM. Since the United States has a capitalistic society, GM had no obligation to provide the jobs to American workers. They could employ whoever they felt fit, and what made this easier was the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA allowed GM to have factories producing cars in Mexico, and ship them back to The United States for little to no tariffs or taxes, which again saved GM money. At the time of the documentary (1989) General Motors was the leader in the automotive industry which raised questions to why eliminate American jobs to save money if they were already a leader? At first, cutting costs on jobs made sense for GM and it was the ideal capitalist thing to do, save money,

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and save it quickly. They were the industry leader and would benefit themselves even more if they could spend less on expenses. In theory they would do be doing economically better. What GM did not take into account was Joseph Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction. By creating a new economic structure and advancing, the old systems and structures are destroyed. General Motors created thousands of jobs in Mexico which saved them money and helped Mexico's economy, but at the same time eliminated 30, 000 jobs in Flint. The core consumers of General Motors were lower to middle class Americans. This was the same social class that General Motors had just destroyed by ' saving money'. In the long run they slowly killed their target market, and left their market unforgiving. According to Marxist theory the working class will carry out a revolution against the bourgeoisie when it is realized the bourgeoisie have complete control. This is exactly what happened; the macro-economy of The United States changed. Americans (whom are known to be very patriotic) refused to support a company that contributed to the destruction of what once was a huge blue collared town. This leads to what has already been briefly discussed, the need for globalization and how it killed Flint.

Globalization killed Flint, Michigan. If General Motors had only moved a limited number of factories to Mexico or not have moved any, Flint would still be economically sound today. As mentioned before, Flint's issue was that it relied only on General Motors and with globalization an option for GM, it crippled Flint. GM did not have to spend as much money to employee Mexican workers, provide health benefits, vacation pay or pensions, which was a main factor to outsource the factories to Mexico. Also with NAFTA

transporting the cars from Mexican factories to American dealers was made much affordable with no taxes or tariffs in place. The same thing would happen to any ‘ motor city’ if their main industrialist decided to globalize. It is slightly being seen today in South-western Ontario, with Oshawa and Windsor. GM and Chrysler have had major layoffs in the past couple of years and it is severely hurting both of the cities’ economies. If GM or Chrysler decided to close the Canadian factories and move them to Mexico, like what was done in Flint, then both Oshawa’s and Windsor’s economies would be destroyed due to globalization. Michael Moore stressed on how could a company that founded itself in a city, just pick up and leave, and although this is a good point, there were a few contradictions in his documentary.

## **Contradictions**

Michael Moore is a renowned exaggerator and it started from “ Roger and Me”. The documentary feels like it hits home because it is being told by a Flint native, someone who has lived through the pain of Flint’s misery.

Michael Moore has claimed to be a Flint Native, but he was only born in Flint. That is where his relation to Flint ends, as he grew up in Davison, Michigan.

The town that he grew up in was not as run down as Flint and wasn’t affected as badly by the globalization of GM’s factories. As seen in the film, Flint was full of poverty, but Davison only has only 6. 7% of their population under the poverty line. Michael Moore isn’t exactly the voice of Flint if he isn’t from Flint. Another contradiction to his arguments in “ Roger and Me” is that voicing Flint’s problems to the public wasn’t his only agenda. It was his first documentary and to make it successful it needed a lot of exposure. “ Roger and Me” didn’t just get exposure; it became one of the most

financially successful documentaries ever made. 5 This made Michael Moore very rich, and even though he still mentions Flint in his documentaries and acts as the voice of Flint, he abandoned Flint and now lives in New York. It seems as he doesn't genuinely care for Flint and only uses them to make himself money, much like what GM did. General Motors used Flint and when they were done with them, abandoned them. How can you make a documentary attacking GM if you did the same thing but to a lesser degree?

### **General Motors Today vs. 1980's**

General Motors today is a mess only comparable to a toddler's tantrum after receiving food they hated. Fiscal earning reports at the end of 2008 concluded that GM was making a profit of approximately negative \$30 billion. General Motors was in so much debt that they needed to be bailed out by the United States' government. It's a complete nightmare and it's followed by layoffs after layoffs just to stay afloat. That seems to be what GM does best, layoffs. They did back in 1989 and they still are today, but now they have thousands of pensions that they need to pay for. With the government's bail out GM was able to reconstruct themselves and their future line up of cars may save the company. The problem is they are in so much debt that it will take a while to dig out of it. If GM did not revive the Chevrolet Camaro, then Oshawa, Ontario would become another Flint. The main reason the plants in Oshawa are still open is because they build the Camaro and there is an extreme high demand for it. In the past year GM has closed or halted countless factories with the closure of Pontiac, Hummer, Saturn and sale of Saab which have contributed to even more layoffs. Although not as bad as today, things weren't great for GM back in the 80's

either. In the late 1980's General Motors lost market share each year falling from 50% to 35%. 8 Another problem was GM's labour costs were higher than their competition. How does a company fix that problem? Outsource to where it's cheaper. History tells us that General Motors will never change. When they are in economic trouble, they will cut massive amounts of jobs and outsource to lower expenses.

## **General Motors in a Capitalist Society**

Does General Motors have the right to make a profit by any means necessary? That depends in the social system that they are present in. General Motors is an American company, and the United States has a capitalist society. General Motors has no obligation to provide work for Americans or to not globalize their factories. Even though they completely devastated Flint, it wasn't illegal. One could see how it could be morally wrong to do that to the city where GM was founded but in my opinion if it isn't illegal, then there isn't anything wrong with it. There was nothing personal about closing factories in Flint, it was just business. The automotive industry may have been the only industry Flint had known, but that was their own fault for relying so heavily on General Motors. If the United States had a command run economic system then there would never be a problem of globalization or layoffs, and if a company did move thousands of jobs from their 'mother' country to another for the purpose of cutting expenses, then yes it would be illegal, therefore GM would not have the right to make a profit by any means necessary. Since General Motors operates in a capitalist society this is irrelevant. In a capitalist society, if a company had to lay off 70% of its workers just to stay in business, it would be accepted. If the

workers were unionized then there would be a huge uproar, but the company still has the right to keep their business alive or make profits by downsizing. Some of General Motors' business decisions seem unethical to some, but legally they are allowed in our capitalist society (ruining a whole American city, cutting pensions in half etc). Of these ' unethical' business decisions, some affected Canada.

## **General Motors In Canada**

With the introduction of NAFTA, not only did General Motors globalize to Mexico, but Canada too. Since the tariffs and taxes were no longer existent this made it much cheaper to produce cars in Canada and send them between North America. This created thousands of jobs as assembly plants, manufacturing plants, and automotive related plants such as chassis frame plants. The globalization of GM plants created a huge economy in Oshawa, Ontario. Recently there have been thousands of cutbacks in South-western Ontario by most major automotive companies including GM. Majority of newscasts during 2008 contained an article about layoffs from GM and cutbacks to benefits creating a negative image in Canada. This helped contribute to a recession in Canada and left many jobless. It was nowhere near the magnitude of Flint's disaster, and since the layoffs GM has been reconstructing their company. General Motors has designated new specific cars to Canadian plants to keep jobs in Canada. As mentioned before, the Oshawa plant manufactures the Chevrolet Camaro, which is a contributing factor to why the plant didn't suffer from additional layoffs or possible closure (the Chevrolet Camaro is a high demand car requiring more employees to meet the mass amounts of orders). It is nearly impossible to



buy a new Camaro now, as you are put onto a huge waiting list. Other notable successful GM cars built in Canada are the Chevrolet Impala built in Ingersoll (which are used by most police forces in Canada), the Chevrolet Equinox (which has very competitive sales records), and the GMC Terrain. There is extreme demand for these cars which means more shifts are required at the Oshawa and Ingersoll plants to meet the demands. Canadian made GM's also have a reputation for being higher quality build than their counterparts, so as long as there is a demand for Canadian cars from the consumer, Canadian GM jobs will stay somewhat secure. Initially General Motors' decisions benefited Canada, and although they have recently had massive amounts of layoffs, the future of GM Canada looks stable.

## **General Motors in Twenty Years**

In the past year General Motors was in huge trouble. They needed a bail out from both the American and Canadian governments or else they would have to claim bankruptcy. The Canadian government provided \$10.5 billion to bailout GM while the American government spent a whopping \$49.4 billion. With these bailouts, the governments own the majority of GM and are in the process of doing extensive restructuring. Although General Motors (now commonly joked around as Government Motors) is greatly in debt (the money lent to them by the government needs to be turned into equity, plus GM is averaging negative \$30 billion in profit a year) their reconstructed line-up of cars and improving technology is their saviour. GM dumped the Hummer line, which cleared up some of GM's negative image. Most of GM's current and future line-up consists of class leading cars in fuel economy, a must to attract the gigantic fuel consumption savvy market. GM is no longer

‘ that company that makes 5mpg trucks’, they are really trying to appeal to today’s eco friendly market. The Chevrolet Volt is in the works for a close release date, and also boasts a better fuel consumption than the current market leader, Toyota Prius. The Prius gets approximately 55mpg while the Volt is projected to get as high as 230mpg and as low as 50mpg (when pushed really hard). If GM is able to overtake Toyota in alternative fuelled vehicles, then they will become a huge automotive player in the next 20 years. Contributing to this, Toyota has had immense recalls for faulty acceleration pedals, and if GM markets itself properly they can overtake a Japanese car influenced American market and generate profit, a first for GM in a long time.