

Sit back, relax, and
enjoy the ride: an
inquiry of hyper-
capitalism in the cave



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Communist ex-Prime Minister of Cuba, Fidel Castro, resolutely declared, “ I find capitalism repugnant. It is filthy, it is gross, it is alienating...because it causes war, hypocrisy, and competition” (brainyquote. com). Nonetheless, the vast majority of today’s sovereign nations have bought into the neoliberal capitalist philosophy, overlooking the societal harms of this modern globalization of capitalism. Castro’s staunch critique of free market economics echoes the ideas of Jose Saramago in his novel, *The Cave*, a scathing indictment of mindless industrial advancement. Saramago suggests that the Center’s unchecked commerce homogenizes its society, and he illustrates this theme through both the attempted control over nature and removal of Cipriano’s sense of individuality. The Center standardizes the entire landscape by controlling the Center and the outside fields of the Green and Industrial Belts, representative of the exploitative nature of capitalistic expansion by the Center.

The Center is the archetypal representation of corporate capitalism, and a crucial part of its society’s economic system is to move away from village-made products to corporatized farms and synthetic goods. Specifically, Saramago exposes the society’s consumerist trend when the assistant head of department illuminates the reason why pottery sales have dropped: “ It was the launch of some imitation crockery made out of plastic, it’s so good that it looks like the real thing, with the added advantage that it’s much lighter and cheaper” (Saramago 12). Essentially, the Center’s modern consumers prefer the “ imitation” - industrial plastic crockery to the natural ceramic kitchenware, merely one of the many consumerist trends that the Center converts as an all-powerful market force to increase its

industrialization. In fact, the Center is ever expanding in its appetite for more land, as Cipriano notes that the Industrial Belt “ more and more resembles a continually expanding tubular construction, a network of pipes designed by an eccentric and built by a maniac” (Saramago 218). Hence, Saramago demonstrates how the expansion of the Center’s control over its neighboring land for “ construction” and other industrialization purposes is simply “ maniac[al]” in nature. Moreover, Saramago offers further description of the Industrial Belt, and denotes its exceedingly mechanized nature with its “ chimneys belching out pillars of toxic fumes into the atmosphere, long-armed cranes, chemical laboratories, oil refineries, fetid, bitter, sickly odors, the strident noise of drilling, the buzz of mechanical saws, the brutal thud of steam hammers and very occasionally, a zone of silence, where no one knows exactly what is being produced” (Saramago 3). As opposed to the natural, hand-made goods that the village produces, the commercialized Center requires such a vast tract of land designated for the mechanized, mass production of goods. This region is so desensitized from humans and nature that “ toxic fumes” and “ sickly odors” are freely released without restraint. While the entire process of producing goods became standardized, the entire landscape became merely a tool for the Center to exploit.

However, the Center’s attempt to control and exploit the land extends to the agricultural sector as well, as the Agricultural Belt near the Center is a region of land crammed with plastic greenhouses. Cipriano describes the homogenized nature of the Green Belt: “ For a lot of people these greenhouses are machines, machines for making vegetables, nothing could be easier, it’s like a recipe, mix all the ingredients together, set the

thermostat and the hygrometer, press a button, and shortly afterwards up pops a lettuce” (Saramago 218). The extent to which the hyper-capitalist Center has standardized its society is near lunatic, as Saramago comically illustrates that even the production of a lettuce is by a “ machine for making vegetables”. In this society, agriculture has lost its natural process and has been supplanted by a standardized, uniform procedure with definite “ recipes”. Not only does the Center manipulate the landscape with the Industrial and Agricultural Belts, the Center even expands its commercialization underground. The advertising sign posted for the newly discovered cave in the Center reads: “ COMING SOON, PUBLIC OPENING OF PLATO’S CAVE, AN EXCLUSIVE ATTRACTION, UNIQUE IN THE WORLD, BUY YOUR TICKET NOW” (Saramago 307). The discovery of the cave is a windfall for the people running the Center, as it allows them to monetize the newfound cave as an “ exclusive attraction” to its residents. The ruthlessly self-interested Center uses nature as a means to its commercial ends; moreover, it tries to control nature by faking indoor representations of various natural phenomena. As Cipriano wanders the inside of the Center he discovers “ a summer sky with fluffy clouds, a lake, a real palm tree, the skeleton of a tyrannosaurus, another one apparently alive, Himalayas complete with Everest, an amazon river complete with Indians, a stone raft, a Corcovado Christ, a Trojan horse, ...a comet, a galaxy, a large dwarf, a small giant, a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Center and had never left it for the outside world” (Saramago 269-70). In this manner, the Center wholly attempts to control nature by simulating environmental spectacles such as “ Everest” and other celestial forms of

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nature such as a “ comet”, “ galaxy”, and even “ a large dwarf” planet in its indoor arena, allowing residents to be content without even glimpsing the “ outside world.” By keeping its inhabitants unaware of the natural forms of all of these simulations, the Center is able to pull all the strings in presenting “ nature” in whatever form it chooses to all its inhabitants. This enables for yet another homogenization of nature, as the Center kills all unique properties that different people experience with varying encounters with nature, while simultaneously exploits the real landscape for its standardized industrial and agricultural purposes.

In essence, the Center’s money-driven hunger for expansion drives its commercial control over varying aspects of nature, ultimately destroying all forms of uniqueness in the process. The increasingly consumerist Center additionally purges Cipriano of his source of individuality - his tangible creations at the pottery - in an attempt to assimilate him and his family into the homogenized Center. Cipriano derives his identity based on the pots that he produces at the pottery in the village; when he learns the news that the Center is recalling all his pottery, he exasperates, “ It would have been far better if I hadn’t woken up at all, at least while I was asleep, I was a potter with work to do...it’s exactly the same as when you’re awake, then, you work and work and work, and one day, you emerge from that dream or that nightmare only to be told that what you did was worthless...” (Saramago 29). Saramago accentuates how vital Cipriano’s handicraft is to his unique identity, as he prefers to live in a dream in which he is allowed to be a “ potter with work to do” rather than a reality in which he is deprived of his work. Specifically, as a result of the Center eliminating the need for potters,

Cipriano feels “worthless” as a person, devoid of the opportunity to express his individuality and creativity with his work. Moreover, Cipriano attaches a sentimental value to the pottery that the Center forces to be closed down, as he thinks, “for other less materialistic reasons, such as knowing beforehand that it would sadden him to destroy what his grandfather had built and what his father had later perfected” (Saramago 157). His entire family has worked in that very pottery for three generations, and thus the value that Cipriano ascribes to his craft is doubly increased. Furthermore, while the Center is merely driven by monetary self-regard, Saramago reveals that Cipriano has “less materialistic reasons” to attach his identity to the goods he produces at the pottery.

When the Center orders Cipriano to send merely half of the total order of 600 figurines, and Marçal is promoted to resident guard, Cipriano refuses to leave his pottery for the corporatized Center and defiantly tells Marta, “Even if you and Marçal have to move to the Center first, I’ll stay here until I’ve finished the order, then I’ll come and join you as I promised...And how do you think I would feel if I abandoned the work halfway through, you don’t seem to understand that, at my age, I don’t have that many things to hold on to” (Saramago 174). Saramago is making the point that Cipriano recognizes how much his “work” means to his identity and that at his age what he produces is what gives him life – it is one of few “things to hold on to” at his age. Until his work is fully accomplished, Cipriano refuses to venture to the Center where everyone has the same daily, monotonous routine. In fact, the Center stifles creativity so much so that after Cipriano moves to the Center, the guard directly states, “people have to learn not to be curious, to walk on by,

not to stick their nose in where it isn't wanted, it's just a question of time and training" (Saramago 272). Patently, everyone working and living in the Center has been trained to "not be curious," but what is most intriguing about the guard's reprimanding is the idea that with "time and training", all inhabitants of the Center fall into the norm. By standardizing the policy to never question the system in place, the Center prevents any inhabitants from questioning the uniform nature of the Center.

Contrastingly, Cipriano feels degraded by his disposability to the Center and wanders aimlessly about the Center; Saramago aptly portrays Cipriano's condition: "From now on everything would be little more than appearance, illusion, absence of meaning, questions with no answers" (Saramago 207). By entering into the Center where everything is commercialized, Cipriano has lost "meaning" for existence, and all the false representations of nature as well as the endless shopping options all seem merely "illusions" that people consume to pursue their materialistic goals. However, sick of the lack of individuality and creativity that the Center embraces, Cipriano refuses to merely live out his life blending in with the crowd of other inhabitants of the Center, and exclaims to Marta: "You must decide what to do with your own lives, but I'm leaving" (Saramago 294). Cipriano's return to the village is a rejection of the standardization of capitalism and an affirmation of controlling "what to do" with his own life. Representative of his individuality, Cipriano's departure from the capitalistic and mechanized Center indicates his desire to freely pursue what gives his life distinctive meaning, something impossible under the homogenized nature of the Center controlled society. Saramago indicates that the capitalist Center standardizes its society by mechanizing

and commercializing the landscape while separating from its inhabitants their unique identities.

Saramago's insight has far reaching implications on the real world politics and economics. For example, many multinational corporations destroy the livelihoods of small farmers in foreign countries in order to fill the wallets of a select few wealthy individuals in developed countries. Moreover, as society rampantly industrializes, more people move away from jobs they love to work in homogenized, mechanical labor, leading to the rich getting even richer. Although many admonish Fidel Castro for his extremist viewpoints, there is a kernel of truth in the wisdom of Saramago and Castro - that unrestrained corporate greed can take away the things we, as individuals, value most, in a voracious scramble for both land and profits.