

Always-Already Recreating the “Same Old Nightmare”: The Function of Ideology in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*

The ambiguous ending of *Player Piano*, Kurt Vonnegut’s debut novel, raises this question: Why do the workers rebuild the machines, not only causing their revolution to fail but also recreating the oppressive conditions that allow engineers and managers to retain their power in society? After destroying or disassembling nearly every machine in Ilium, New York, the workers abandon their revolution and begin rebuilding the machines that controlled them. The novel’s protagonist, Paul Proteus, observes one man repairing a soda machine and notes that “he was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they liked to do best . . . — replacing men like himself with machines” (Vonnegut 338). Before his surrender to the police, Paul proposes a toast: “‘To a better world,’ he started to say, but he cut the toast short, thinking of the people of Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old nightmare. He shrugged. ‘To the record,’ he said, and smashed the empty bottle on a rock” (340).

Much criticism on *Player Piano* interprets its conclusion as evidence of Vonnegut’s misanthropy. According to this view, humanity’s powerlessness to resist oppression originates in an innate imperfection or flaw. For Vonnegut, argues Robert Tally Jr.,

the issue is always that humans are themselves so “naturally” unable to do the right thing. Or rather, it is entirely in their nature to do the thing that will eventually cause them harm. It is as if humans are machines programed to self-destruct. (9)

Examining the novel’s ending, Tally concludes that “the revolution that was to liberate man from machines *fails* not because of a repressive State apparatus—the army and the police—working on behalf of the machines, but precisely because of the inner failures of human, all-too-human nature” (23). Vonnegut’s biographer, Charles Shields, makes a similar assessment: “It’s human nature—technology can be absorbing” (125). Leonard Mustazza interprets the novel as “an

analysis of the human psyche . . . and a scrutiny of the human condition” (44). Comparing *Player Piano* to other dystopian novels, Mustazza concludes that in Vonnegut’s novel “the force contended with is the tangled web of the self” (43). In other words, “machines have not imprisoned the people of Ilium; their own humanity has” (44). Expanding Mustazza’s argument, Tally observes that

those other dystopian visions tend to pit the individual human against the dehumanizing system of the machine, such that the individual’s humanity—even, or especially, in its “tragic” defeat—shines through as a force of resistance. Vonnegut, notably, does not allow for this, as he maintains that the basic impediments to human liberation and fulfillment are not the dehumanizing powers of capitalism, technology, or the totalitarian state, but humanity itself. (28)

The revolution fails, Tally says, because “human beings themselves are the greatest, indeed perhaps the only, impediment to human freedom and happiness” (23). However, I contend that capitalism is the primary target of *Player Piano* and that capitalist ideology impedes the workers’ liberation. My argument has two stages: First, I will show how the novel reflects Vonnegut’s socialism. Then I will use Louis Althusser’s analysis of ideology to explain the novel’s critique of capitalism.

Before examining the novel, I want to summarize Vonnegut’s politics. In his works, Vonnegut champions the rights of the working class and lambasts free enterprise for being ““much too hard on the old and the sick and the shy and the poor and the stupid, and on people nobody likes”” (qtd. in Gannon and Taylor 5). Charles Shields says Vonnegut “objected to” using “capitalist ideology . . . to justify the power of the rich over the poor” (298). In short, Vonnegut criticizes capitalism because he believes it dehumanizes workers.

His concern for the working class originated during his formative years, when he “realized he was being raised to become bourgeois” (Shields 30). Vonnegut experienced “his first real-life lesson in social and economic disparity,” Shields explains, when he recognized that

he was a beneficiary of “nepotism” at his family’s hardware store (30). Later, one of his uncles gave him Thorstein Veblen’s 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, which strafes upper-class families like Vonnegut’s for their “conspicuous consumption” (30). Matthew Gannon and Wilson Taylor of the *Vonnegut Review* explain that, as an adult, Vonnegut’s “concern for the working class eventually blossomed into a full-scale political outlook that was inspired by a combination of Midwestern populism and home-grown American socialism—particularly that of Eugene V. Debs” (4-5). One of Debs’s famous statements, which Vonnegut often quoted, summarizes the ethics of socialism: ““While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free”” (qtd. in 5). This concern for the working class is central to *Player Piano* as well as Marxist criticism, which Terry Eagleton says “calls on a writer to commit his art to the cause of the proletariat” (37).

Indeed, Matthew Gannon notes that *Player Piano* “reads like an exposition on Marxian political and sociological theory” (2). The social formation it depicts is *state capitalism*, in which the state functions as a corporation controlling the means of production. During the war preceding the novel’s events, “the economy had, for efficiency’s sake, become monolithic” (Vonnegut 82). In fact, “the machines and the institutions of government were . . . integrated” (313). Running the entire economy is EPICAC XIV, a supercomputer that decides what commodities “America and her customers could have and how much they would cost” (118).

According to Marx, the means of production in a capitalist society exploit the working class by alienating laborers from the objects they produce. In the nineteenth-century factory system that Marx condemned, “a worker would be involved only in a small part of the manufacturing process” and “would thus become distanced from the products of her own labor,

becoming alienated not only from others but also even from herself” (Booker 73). Ilium’s capitalist society is not content merely to alienate workers; it replaces them entirely with more efficient machines. For example, Paul records the movements of Rudy Hertz, a lathe operator at the Ilium Works, onto magnetic tape and then replaces him with a machine that performs his job more quickly and efficiently:

This little loop in the box before Paul . . . was Rudy as Rudy had been to his machine that afternoon—Rudy, the turner-on of power, the setter of speeds, the controller of the cutting tool. This was the essence of Rudy as far as his machine was concerned, as far as the economy was concerned . . .

Now, by switching in lathes on a master panel and feeding them signals from the tape, Paul could make the essence of Rudy Hertz produce one, ten, a hundred, or a thousand of the shafts. (10-11)

In this technocratic capitalist society, “most lower-echelon jobs” can be completed “more quickly and efficiently and cheaply by machines” (2). The result, Paul says, is that ““machines and organization and pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness”” (314).

*Player Piano* describes three Industrial Revolutions, each of which alienates the working class through an increasingly mechanized means of production. In the First Industrial Revolution ““machines devalued muscle work,”” relieving men of manual labor (52). In the Second Industrial Revolution, which concluded before the events of the novel, the machines relieved workers of the ““annoyance or boredom that [they] used to experience in routine jobs”” (52). By the Third Industrial Revolution, which is the novel’s setting, machines such as EPICAC XIV ““devalue human thinking”” (15). According to the upper class’s version of history, however, these Industrial Revolutions have “liberated” the working class “from production” (Vonnegut 21). “Perhaps the workers are freed from having to labor,” Gannon and Taylor admit, “but they are never free from a class system that categorizes them as former laborers” (4).

Capitalism creates a social hierarchy that results in another form of alienation—what Booker describes as “a separation between individuals” (73). For example, in Ilium the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are separated geographically. The upper class lives north of the Iroquois River, while the lower class lives south of the river—a spatial metaphor for the social hierarchy. The classes are separated by intelligence as well: “the smarter you are, the better you are” (Vonnegut 93). As Finnerty remarks, “It’s about as rigid a hierarchy as you can get . . . . How’s somebody going to up his I.Q.?” (93). A lower IQ and a southern location reinforce the reality that the proletariat occupies the bottom of society.

The perspective of an outsider, the Shah of Bratphur, emphasizes the social hierarchy’s exploitation of the proletariat. While touring America to learn about its economy in hopes of industrializing his Third World country, the Shah—along with his interpreter and Doctor Halyard, a U.S. government official—travel through Ilium. As they pass a road crew filling in a pothole, the Shah requests “to know who owns these slaves” (20). Halyard tries to explain that the workers are not slaves but American citizens, representatives of the “average man” (21). But, as the Shah’s interpreter explains, “this *average man*, there is no equivalent in our language” (21), for in his country there “are only the Elite and the *Takaru*,” or *slave* (22). The Shah’s perspective exposes the social reality in Ilium: regardless of class labels, a class system still exists.

Eventually, the dehumanizing means of production in this capitalist society cause the proletariat to revolt. The revolution at the novel’s end, however, is not the first one the working class in Ilium has attempted. When the workers returned from fighting the war, which took place more than a decade before the events of the novel, they realized the “managers and engineers [had] learned to get along without their men and women” (1). In response, the workers rebelled,

but unsuccessfully. These workers who “had been the rioters, the smashers of machines” (29), during *that* revolution rise up again at the end of *Player Piano* and destroy the machines.

Inexplicably, however, they begin rebuilding the machines, recreating the conditions favorable to the technocratic upper class. Here again is the novel’s central question: If the means of production in Ilium dehumanize the workers, why do they reproduce the conditions necessary for their exploitation?

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser answers this question in his influential 1970 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” He argues that a capitalist society maintains its existence because the working class continually submits to the ideology of the ruling class:

the reproduction of labour power requires . . . a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression. (89)

According to Eagleton, Marxist criticism, which “aims to understand ideologies,” defines *ideology* as “the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times” (viii). “The function of ideology,” he continues, “is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society,” because, “the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class” (5).

Althusser’s contribution to Marxist criticism is his theory that ideology is material: “An ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (112). He argues that an individual’s participation in societal institutions produces his submission to the dominant ideology. He considers the State to be “a ‘machine’ of repression which enables the ruling classes . . . to ensure their domination over the working class” (92). Since, he says, “no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses” (98), he analyzes the institutions that manifest the ideology of the ruling class. He classifies them as one of two types:

the Repressive State Apparatuses and the Ideological State Apparatuses. The RSAs—State-controlled public institutions such as the army, the police, the government, the prisons, and the courts—function by violence. On the other hand, the ISAs—private institutions such as the family, the church, the educational system, cultural institutions, and communication institutions—function by ideology. In other words, the Ideological State Apparatuses “subtly mold human subjects through ideology, in turn reproducing the system” (“Louis” 1332).

Combining this conception of ideology with structuralism, Althusser concludes that the dominant ideology in society preexists, and thus determines, the lives of individuals and transforms them into subjects. This process, which he calls *interpellation*, is akin to a police officer hailing a bystander: “Hey, you there!” (118). It is important to note that the interpellation of individuals is “one and the same thing” as “the existence of ideology” (118). Since the ideology of the ruling class is ubiquitous in society, “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*” (119). M.H. Abrams explains that an individual, as the subject of ideology, assumes “a position as a person with certain views and values, which, however, in every instance serve the ultimate interests of the ruling class” (158). Interpellation, therefore, “allows the existing power structure of capitalist society to maintain its domination over the general population without resorting to violence or force” (Booker 82).

By participating in the practices of Ideological State Apparatuses, individuals in *Player Piano* subscribe to the dehumanizing ideology of the ruling class. Althusser explains, for example, that the educational system determines a person’s worth based on his perceived value to society, preparing the intelligent students to become “the agents of exploitation (capitalists,

managers)” and ejecting those deemed unintelligent ““into production”” (105). In *Player Piano*, the educational system operates identically. The National General Classifications Test, which all citizens take, rewards those who are considered intelligent with a college education and punishes those who are considered unintelligent with lifelong service in either the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. As Althusser says, the educational ISA is “wrapped in the ruling ideology” (104), preparing graduates to become managers and engineers who will maintain the exploitation of the working class. In *Ilium*, “this elite business, this assurance of superiority, this sense of rightness about the hierarchy topped by managers and engineers—this was instilled in all college graduates, and there were no bones about it” (Vonnegut 6).

The ideology of the ruling class also structures the family, typified in the novel by the Hagstrohms. The Hagstrohm’s M-17 house, designed by the State and sold to the workers, has machines that supposedly give humans more time to “Live! Get a little fun out of life” (164). Replaced by machines—such as an ultrasonic dishwasher and washing machine that clean better than a human can—Mrs. Hagstrohm spends her free time watching television. It is only when the washing machine breaks and she has to wash her family’s clothes by hand in the bathtub that she experiences a sense of purpose and worth: “It’s kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don’t mind. It gives me something to do” (165). Matthew Gannon describes the situation this way: “The advanced technology in *Player Piano* hasn’t liberated humanity, only furthered their exploitation. Their lives are easier, but not more meaningful” (4).

Likewise, by concealing the dehumanizing conditions of the working class, the cultural ISA espouses the ideology of the ruling class. Paul watches a television sitcom about a working class family that depicts their home as the epitome of domestic bliss. The father, who works in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, is “cheery, pink, in first-rate health” (261). The

mother convinces her son, who has discovered the low IQs of his parents (this information is public knowledge in Ilium), that ““some of the unhappiest people in this world are the smartest ones”” (260). Similarly, a drama performed at The Meadows assures the engineers and managers that the working class depends on them: “the play’s message . . . [was] that the common man wasn’t nearly as grateful as he should be for what the engineers and managers had given him” (220). Conversely, the National Council of Arts and Letters censors a novel challenging the machines’ authority in society (244).

The communications ISA also disseminates the ideology of the ruling class. The public relations institution ensures the dominant ideology is transmitted clearly. Public relations, explains Halyard, specializes

in the cultivation, by applied psychology in mass communication media, of favorable public opinion with regard to controversial issues and institutions, without being offensive to anyone of importance, and with the continued stability of the economy and society its primary goal. (242)

For example, an advertising campaign that attempted to make people ““think the managers and engineers had given America everything: forests, rivers, minerals, mountains, oil—the works”” (91) was an effort ““to make big business popular”” (92). This ad effectively transmitted the ideology of the ruling class, for Ilium now exemplifies a capitalist social formation with managers and engineers at the top of society. This, Althusser explains, is the power of Ideological State Apparatuses: “The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of State power alone. It is by the installation of the ISAs in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology” (125).

In conclusion, according to Althusser’s analysis, the workers in *Player Piano* rebuild the machines that replaced them because the ideology of the upper class always-already interpellates

them, making them, as Vonnegut says, “thorough believers in mechanization . . . even when their lives had been badly damaged by mechanization” (253). The technocratic capitalist society in Ilium has programmed its citizens to submit to the belief that “man is on earth to create more durable and efficient images of himself, and, hence, to eliminate any justification at all for his own continued existence” (302-3). ““Because of the way the machines are changing the world,”” one character laments, ““old values,”” such as freedom and equality, ““don’t apply any more. People have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves, or wards of the machines”” (290). From a perspective informed by Althusser, who believes “that freedom of thought and action is limited by . . . socioeconomic systems” (“Louis” 1332), the novel’s ending suggests that workers are always-already in submission to capitalist ideology.

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