

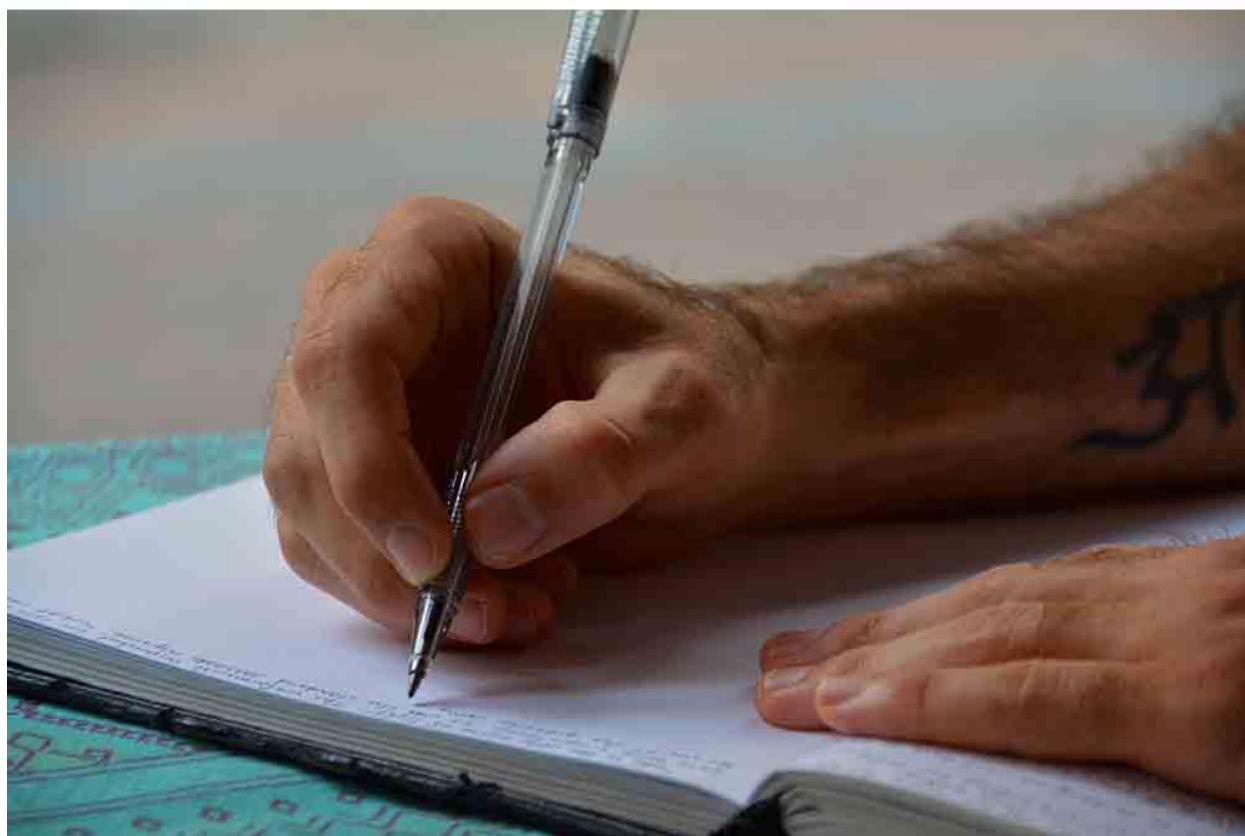
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Rethinking the Socialist Voice: Jack London and “The Dignity of Dollars”

Abstract

The writings of Jack London offer a nuanced reading and opportunities for dynamic interpretation. He is one of the most prolific and debated writers of the twentieth century American literature. The “rags to riches” writer, whose early life was one of struggle and loss; he was very much influenced by the disparity in the social structure. Though he himself declared in an interview that he writes for money and caters to the demand of the market, in another place he was very displeased at the caging and categorizing that was often done by critics. He emphasized that an approach to his writings should be attempted towards bringing out the “motif under the motif” and not just labelling him. One such categorizing is his adherence to socialism. The purpose of this paper is to go beyond the theoretical premise of socialism and tend to unearth the contestations to the socialist ideals through his non fictional writing “The Dignity of Dollars”. An effort has been made to use the premise of Michel Foucault to understand the power relations in society and how Jack London even years before conformed to it.

Keywords: Power, Truth, Knowledge, revolutionary socialism, ideology

Jack London, one of the most celebrated writers of American literature, is also the most misrepresented writers of the twentieth century. He has often been pigeonholed by critics as a Boy Socialist or anarchist or individualist depending on the kinds of work by the writer that they are analyzing. A man who has suffered many odds in his childhood owing to the failed marriage of his mother and grew up in the midst of poverty, he became mature quite at an early age. His maturity is brought about by his experiences of the world when he has moved from one work to another, from a newspaper boy to an oyster pirate to a laundryman, a hobo on a socialist mission to join General Kelly's army in Washington DC, to a man on an expedition to the Klondike Gold Rush, to a war correspondent and finally a writer. From witnessing history to creating one has been one of his greatest achievements. All throughout his life he remained very close to his roots and his works mostly reflect the life and plight of his people. Though he is basically known for his Klondike stories and novels, his non fictional writings are no less significant. Written at different times across his writing career, these non fictional writings present his own ideas and ideologies. This paper shall take into account his essay "The Dignity of Dollars" and present how this writing can be taken out from the usual caging of socialism and represent how Jack London questioned many of its basic tenets and that his motive has been to show how power structure operates in the society. It can be amplified by taking the tenets of Foucault and this paper shall tend to explore the relevance of Jack London's writings even in the present times.

In a notebook entry after reading *The Communist Manifesto*, London writes:

The whole history of mankind has been a history of contests between exploiting and exploited; a history of these class struggles shows the evolution of man; with the coming of industrialism and concentrated capital a stage has been reached whereby the exploited cannot attain its emancipation from the ruling class without once and for all emancipatory society at large from all

future exploitation, oppression, class distinctions and class struggles. (qtd. in John Simkin “Jack London”)

Socialism decrees that there have been two classes and the relationship between them is as between majority and minority but who constitutes the former and who the latter that is a problematic. Besides, in this relationship, what finally socialism avers is that there should come a state of saturation when the relationship would be on equal plane and therefore that would bring in the end of the class struggle. Socialism strives towards a classless society and the minimum of State intervention. The State shall act as a bridge between producers and consumers, they should champion the equality and harmony among the people, ensure that everyone has work and the relationship among people should be one of cooperation rather than competition. In “The Dignity of Dollars”, London begins with man’s instinct towards internalization of ideas and concepts that have preceded his individual existence:

Man is a blind helpless creature. He looks back with pride upon his goodly heritage of the ages, and yet obeys unwittingly every mandate of that heritage; for it is incarnate with him, and in it are embedded the deepest roots of his soul. Strive as he will, he cannot escape it – unless he be a genius, one of those rare creations to whom alone is granted the privilege of doing entirely new and original things in new and original ways. . . (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

Here Jack London is stating the universal problem of stagnancy of thoughts. Man basically likes to be confined in what has been ordained by his predecessors and he cannot dare to think out of it. For instance, a rich man’s son born with a silver spoon in his mouth would grow up believing that he should not be doing his own work and there are others who should serve him and wait upon him. Similarly, a poor man’s son would continue with the family struggle and hardly would be able to walk out of the track. Rousseau once said that “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. There are some who may believe

themselves master of others, and are no more enslaved than they” (*The Social Contract* Book I, 45). Rightly, it is that the disparity is created and enforced by ideology and man conforms to it. Like all other socialists and Marxists, London too wants to touch upon this problem to bring a change in the entire social hierarchy and his writings avers to that. His *The Valley of the Moon* shows the complete abolition of work for others and represents work for the self. Andre Gorz in his book *Farewell to the Working Class* ensured that people should work and produce for themselves and their own needs which will reduce dependence on others and there shall be no power of coercion and competition. London was very much influenced by Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backwards* where Bellamy presents a socialist utopia where people live in harmony and not in competition. The basic idea of London is to work for one’s own basic needs and complete abolition of the class structure.

However London knows that his ideals are not easy to achieve. In “The Dignity of Dollars” he next points out how if one strives to move up breaking the chains, there are forces to pull him down. That force is not always external; sometimes it is the swaying internal will power which takes a backward step:

Servants of his will, they at the same time master him. They may not coerce genius, but they dictate and sway every action of the clay-born. . . . Out of his ideas he may weave cunning theories, beautiful ideals; but he is working with ropes of sand. At the slightest stress, the last least bit of cohesion flits away, and each idea flies apart from its fellows, while all clamour that he do this thing, or think this thing in the ancient time-honoured way. (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

In a Foucauldian analysis of power, the classification of the classes of bourgeois and proletariat and the class exerting power and the one seeking emancipation, seems to be a double edged sword. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault talks about the subject

becoming the object and the subject as the self subject/ object of analysis. The human subject is possessed of certain knowledge and some signifiers which signify ultimately his own self-knowledge. In talking about the bourgeois power and standing in contrast to it, one seems to align and conform to the ideology of the proletariat – “In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose motives only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process. They naturally enter as allies of the proletariat, because power is exercised the way it is in order to maintain capitalist exploitation” (“Intellectuals and Power” 216). It seems that Foucault was against taking sides or at least did not want to be labeled. The moment one goes against an established notion he is considered as a violator of right codes of society. Whose right codes? Obviously of the ruling class whose moral code prevails. London stresses towards collectivity and realizes that to bring about a positive change in society it is necessary that they should work together and not in isolation. In the above passage he clears that one may be strong enough to challenge the blind precedence, but however the cohesion is so strong and invincible that his zeal to stay strong to his own will and determination gets a severe blow and he takes his foot back. This underlying idea sharply contradicts Marx’s idea of revolution. Though initially he burned with the same revolutionary zeal, the “Boy Socialist” later realized that revolution may lead to utter mismanagement. What is important is to progress slowly, identify the positive forces, assemble together and strive towards bringing the change. A sudden revolutionary outbreak would only lead to complete disorder. It is similar to leading a cavalry charge against a horde of pointed machine guns. The zest towards display of heroism is tomfoolery and therefore futile. Like a Byronic hero, London realizes that man needs to be made aware of his exploiting machineries; he must become conscious of his exploitative positions before attempting to action.

In a letter to Cloudsley Johns, London however states the merits of revolutionary socialism:

I should like to have socialism... yet I know that socialism is not the very next step; I know that capitalism must live its life first, that the world must be exploited to the utmost first, that first must intervene a struggle for life among the nations, severer, more widespread than before. I should much prefer to wake tomorrow in a smoothly running socialist state but I know that I shall not; I know it cannot come that way. I know that the child must go through the child's sickness before it becomes a man. So, always, remember that I speak of things that are; not of things that should be. (qtd. in John Simkins "Jack London")

Very pertinently he voices this above observation through "The Dignity of Dollars". As he moves through the narrative, it seems a trajectory of life of a common 'clay born' man. And as clay born man he is not entitled to think beyond the role destined for him:

He is only a clay-born; so he bends his neck. He knows further that the clay-born are a pitiful, pitiless majority, and that he may do nothing which they do not do. (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

Next London proceeds to establish the idea that economic potentiality is the order of the day. A man may either be a genius or a clay-born. For the former his capacity to exult his scholarship is his manifestation of power, but for the mundane the economic wealth is the determinant of his strength and superiority. Besides men are prone to judge on the basis of outward appearance and that's why he next proceeds to share a story of how he is accepted in an alien land. Here 'I' does not specifically represent the narrator. It is every ordinary man. He presents two overlapping ideas simultaneously. On the one hand it is 'power', and on the

other 'truth'. Soren Kierkegaard, an existentialist philosopher, makes a very pertinent observation on 'power' and 'truth':

Truth is a power. But we can see that only in rare instances, because it is suffering and must be defeated as long as it is truth. When it has become victorious others will join it. Why? Because it is truth? No, if it had been for that reason they would have joined it also when it was suffering. Therefore they do not join it because it has power. They join it after it has become a power because others had joined it. (qtd. in Hubben 10)

There is no denying the fact that London was very much inspired by existentialism and Nietzsche had a profound influence upon many of his writings. Like as is stated by Kierkegaard that there is no powerful truth, but rather that is deigned as truth which could become power. In other words, truth becomes synonymous of the ideology of the powerful. So therefore when London proceeds to explain that his primitive dress in an alien land could subsume both power and powerlessness and it is the manouvre of the 'body' (the man in question) who has the ability to channelize it on whichever way he desires. Therefore, if he wants that people should mock him and caricature his primitive get up he should chose to be the victim. On the other hand if he wants to take the baton in his own hands then he has to convince first himself and then the men that he is power. This is very true in respect of power oligarchies. In a capitalist system of power the owners of capital propagate their own ideologies as truth and man by his very nature conforms to it. They are convinced of their own inferiority and the superiority of the master class. Similarly in this essay the narrator chooses to the take the power baton in his own hands and therefore he chose his weapon of the certain hogskin belt that becomes the manifesto of his superiority:

. . . Oh, it's absurd, I grant, but had that belt not been so circumstanced, and so situated, I should have shrunk away into side streets and back alleys, walking

humbly and avoiding all gregarious humans except those who were likewise abroad without belts. Why? I do not know, save that in such way did my father before me.

Viewed in the light of sober reason, the whole thing was preposterous. But I walked down the gang-plank with the mien of a hero, of a barbarian who knew himself to be greater than the civilization he invaded. I was possessed of the arrogance of a Roman governor. . . What manner of man can this mortal be? I was superior to convention, and the very garb which otherwise would have damned me tended towards my elevation. And all this was due, not to my royal lineage, nor to the deeds I had done and the champions I had overthrown, but to a certain hogskin belt buckled next the skin... (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

When the belt becomes the symbol of power it is the subject choice of the subject himself to identify as power instead of as an object to be caricatured by the opposing force. The relationship between signifier and signified is very volatile and the very position of the belt can subsume a different kind of power over another. This is how the capitalist masters have been duping people for generations. Men have a natural tendency towards idolization and love to cocoon himself in the role of a puppet. This is true in all cultures across space and time. London brings in the examples of Roman conquerors. Perhaps by referring to them he wants to assign an universality towards this tendency of blind faith. The Romans stand for power and conquest. They did not have any prejudice against any religion except if it confronted their political gains. It is said that when Jesus Christ was produced as a rebel before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, he was seen as a political rebel and was therefore tried and executed. It is the mandate of every power oligarch to suppress the defendant voice. The capitalist creates an aura of superiority, an illusion of caretaker. He creates his own

version of truth and righteousness to keep the herd under him. The best means is by squandering a fraction of his wealth which is nothing but the wealth of all. However, he justifies it as charity, reward for obeisance, payment for work done etc. The clay born believes in it and does not question. That is why, London in the letter to Johns points out man's foolishness and how he has suspended reason and logic and therefore before socialism could thrive, it needs capitalism to completely exhaust itself.

The role played by the narrator is double edged. On the one hand he rises above all others and creates an aura of superiority, on the other he unlike the power oligarchs is pricked by a sense of self consciousness. Here he becomes the dream ideal socialist who thinks for all, works for all and serves all. Very cleverly, London brings in the only weapon which could make man rise from his somnambulism – books. Books are the weapons of the powerful; that powerful man who is not blinded by egoism, rather who is aware of the wrongs and injustices around. Books enlighten the clay born to rise from the lurch. He talks about Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam who rose from meager beginnings to becoming one of Europe's greatest thinkers and one of the founding fathers of humanism. It is interesting to note that London was very much influenced by the writings of Henry David Thoreau and his transcendentalist philosophy that society and its institutions corrupt the purity of the individual. It is also said that London even noted Thoreau's influence on many noted English socialists like Edward Carpenter, Henry S. Salt, and Robert Blatchford (Louise E. Wright, "Jack London's Knowledge of Thoreau"). Like the English Thoreauvians, London also did not believe in the theoretical enterprise of socialism, rather he wanted socialist influence at the practical level. It is significant to note that "Carpenter endorsed but did not join the Fellowship of the New Life, a socialist organization founded in 1883 on principles that, according to Ramsay MacDonald, owed more to Emerson and Thoreau than to Karl Marx and H.M Hyndman"(Louise E. Wright 63, quotes from Hendricks 415). London too after his

initial attachment with the Socialist Party eventually got disillusioned by the party ideals and distanced himself from it. While initially exuberant in his endeavours to champion the change, he gradually became skeptical of his ideals to bring in any immediate change. That is why once being charged up by the ideals of Erasmus, in the next paragraph he cannot let go of the fact that Socrates was executed. However his ideal to question and not accept everything at face value tended to inspire him and thus resonate in his belief that the man of knowledge has the wealth which supersedes all material wealth. He shall have wise and good men around him and even if he fails he would find his wealth transferred to his ‘meanest varlet of his whole family’ and “he himself would very soon become one of his servants, as if he were a thing that belonged to his wealth and so was bound to follow its fortune.” (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

But the trick again lies in the next paragraph. Man is so actually foolish that he gives importance to material possessions and are very reluctant to move away from it. That’s why when the narrator realizes he could soon be dispossessed, he immediately fled the place. In a different interpretation this could be considered as a lesson that knowledge alone could help people dethrone the power oligarchs and then only the true and real socialism could be achieved.

However this flickering sanity is only short lived. We are reminded of the Roman mob in Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* who, after the assassination of Caesar could hardly judge independently of their own logic and reason. In all cultures mob culture is associated with insane illogical reason. A mob could not exert independent thinking. They are the best pawns of the ideology of the powerful. The narrator in “The Dignity of Dollars” seemed to be disillusioned by truth and mockingly London reflects that no sooner sane logic takes over he once again gets deluded and the bird flies back to its own nest:

But when I recovered my reason, I fell upon my particular gods and berated them mightily, and as penance for their watchlessness placed them away among dust and cobwebs. Oh no, not for long. They are again enshrined, as bright and polished as of yore, and my destiny is once more in their keeping.

(Revolution and Other Essays)

London does not keep any avenue unturned and so in order to answer the likely question that whether knowledge alone can enunciate the change, he brings in the next proposition that knowledge should be supplanted by labour to help achieve the ends altogether. If we take a break and ponder over how the capitalist became the owner of the means of production, it definitely reflects that he also had the knowledge to achieve the ends. Similarly, for a proletariat to fight for his rights he needs to be better equipped. An empty clamouring for justice will not help him in meeting his ends. Therefore he should garner other means to achieve this feat and that is positive skilled labour. Socialism is not a myth, neither is it a doctrine; it is a reality of those who could hark back and 'strives for a better form of Government than the one he is living under'. (David Wichlan 14) Therefore, when he sees his "hogskin belt was flat as famine" it becomes representative of the death of oligarchy and he could see from his window how a man was working industriously among his cabbages. This shift in focus is the triumph of socialism. London write in his "Preface" to *War of the Classes* that the capitalist must learn that what socialism wants is not an usurpation as it itself does, rather it avers for its rights, which is just and in whatever form it may be they demand what is their own and no one else's. This could be similarly equated to the rising tide of decolonization with the colonies asking for its land back and not getting duped by any missionary illusion that they need to be revived from the heart of darkness. In the present essay when every man seems to question "man, where are your cabbages?" it seems to resonate with the words "what have you yourself produced as to lay claim over the

production?” In *The Valley of the Moon*, London shows on the one hand people like Tom who clamour for their rights doing nothing productive and on the other there are Billy and Saxon who could rise above their working class existence and work for themselves, becoming farmers of their own lands and working for their own sustenance. They are socialists and more precisely individualists but they are not malign as to horde the surplus. London’s socialism simply wants all to work for themselves. It is celebration of work.

London represents what happens when man cannot fight for his rights. The ability to produce empowers man. So the cabbageless man becomes a pawn at the hands of the superior lords, the claws of bourgeois capitalism clings to him. When he fails to produce for himself, he becomes a puppet at the hands of the capitalist master. The usurer is the concrete embodiment of that master class who is the very face of exploitation:

Behind him was the solid phalanx of a bourgeois society. Law and order upheld him, while I titubated, cabbageless, on the ragged edge. Moreover, he was possessed of a formula whereby to extract juice from a flattened lemon, and he would do business with me. (*Revolution and Other Essays*)

The alarming note is when one is not conscious of his own power he has the most tendency to be exploited. Saxon does not know how to sell her knickknacks and so Mercedes acts as the middleman and shares in the profit which could have been Saxon’s own. (*The Valley of the Moon*) The next statement is that ideas alone cannot bring in a change. A man conscious of his own exploitation may succumb to his injuries if he does not know how to avenge for the wrongs. Just as Mercedes has pocketed the largest denomination of the profit, so also the usurer charges seventy percent interest for the loan. However, it pricks into the conscience of the man just as Saxon was conscious of her exploitation when she visited the shop which sold her wares. The last paragraph bound back to the optimism and avers that all is not lost. Once man becomes conscious of the inimical factors, he could then tend towards

uprooting that structure. All the men then should collectively work to uproot the establishment and create the better world of hope, abundance and harmony.

Therefore, the above discussion pings on the socialist concerns of Jack London as is exhibited in the essay “The Dignity of Dollars”. However, the effort here was not to confine the study to the basic premises of socialism; rather effort is made to provide alternative contestations beyond the general purview of socialism. By impinging on the questions of ‘truth’ and ‘power’, effort has been made to widen the horizon of analysis and reflect upon how thinkers like Thoreau, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche had an impact upon the ideals and observations of Jack London. It is interesting to note that all these thinkers premised on different schools of thought, but what binds them all is the quest for truth and emancipation of human beings. London wrote this essay in 1900 but even years after it bears relevance. We may attempt to provide a conclusion by aligning the above observation with the Foucauldian emphasis on power as ‘self-knowledge’. It is indeed true that when the narrator finally confronts the usurer he sees through the immateriality and truth of life and being. He realizes that to strive and succeed one needs to conquer not in the manner of hierarchical exertion of power, but by self-introspection and deliberation towards positive labour thereby redefining the entire relation between labour and capital no longer as harnessed and harnesser, but as mutually cooperative and striving towards a better world based on equality and comradeship.

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