


the keyword “solidarity,” and second, by questioning the notion that solidarity is made possible directly by the logic of capital.

Radical theorists and organizers insist on structure as key to the making and maintenance of oppressive systems but do not necessarily extend the same level of critique to the work of building solidarity. Instead, failures to build solidarity are attributed to the interpersonal or social-psychological. Roediger asks us to appreciate, instead, “structural differences.” Such a proposition does not absolve us from the harm we inflict, the silences we perpetuate, and the invisibility we render when our attempts to “organize” solidarity go awry. It does, however, help us think more clearly about the constructions that actively work to reinforce social division.

Solidarity may be the exception instead of the rule. Current thinking about historical instances of supposed solidarity makes the project appear far too easy. Roediger cites the memorial in the Rochester, New York to Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony—whose alliance around black abolition and rights, and women’s suffrage ended bitterly following the age of emancipation. At the very least, we can better appreciate the structure of obstacles to solidarity—obstacles that the logic of capital requires. Roediger does not ask that we abandon or suppress our desire to see and build a multiracial working class. He does insist that we see with clear eyes “what we are up against.”

Class, Race and Marxism is required reading for anyone who wishes to make sense of the links between labor, race, and anti-racism. These self-reflective essays demonstrate the “explanatory weight” of race to understandings of capital and capitalism and the significance of black radical intellectualism—itsself a product of radical struggle—to making race visible in Marxism. Without access to this tradition, of the kind provided by figures like Roediger, our ability even to discern the obstacles we face—much less transcend them—is diminished. Capital has passed down its traditions, but so, too, do its opponents.

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The Magic Castle: Hope and Despair in the Florida Project

“The Florida Project”

Directed by Sean Baker

Cre Film, Freestyle Picture Company, June Pictures, Cinereach production, 2017

Reviewed by: Jay Youngdahl

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Every day progressives fret about those most affected economically by the draconian and regressive moves of the Trump administration. Many question, as did a recent *New York Times* story, “Why Don’t the Poor Fight Back?” Beneath compassion that is often real and deep, liberals seem to wonder how poor people could be stupid enough to rebuff their own solutions and fall for Donald Trump.

“The Florida Project” attempts a graphic and honest answer to this important question. The movie is a tale of life for the disposable workers, black, brown, and white, who exist at the permanent periphery of the global economy. Set in a motel ironically named the Magic Castle, sitting along a busy highway in the

shadow of Disney World, the movie's world is one where rhythms of poverty prevail, occasionally punctuated by contradictory outbursts of existential terror as well as kindness.

The star of the film is a precocious young girl, Moonee, played by Brooklynn Prince, whose mom, Halley, played by Bria Vinaite, has no hope. Yet they are often smiling, striving daily to have fun. Not bothering with school, Moonee invents an amusing life for herself and her friends. As she plays around the local drainage ditches that populate central Florida and explores abandoned buildings with her pals, her life feels similar to the bucolic adventures of many rural and suburban American youths. The movie's scenes are bathed in warm Florida pastels—both natural and Disney-fake. At first glance, the desperation and despair are hard to spot. Yet the determinative realities of poverty are never far away. As the movie progresses, the foreboding increases. Things are going to go bad.

When her day of youthful shenanigans is over, Moonee returns to the Magic Castle—where the TV is always on, junk food is the best it gets, and the mothers who live there have no choice but to sell their labor and bodies, in one way or another, to survive. All know which day the fundamentalist Christian food van is coming, where they can get white bread and jelly.

At the Magic Castle, days pass as though on the lunar calendar as Moonee and Halley must move out every twenty-nine days to comply with rules against long-term rentals. They stash their meager belongings in a storage room and go across the street to the Futureland motel—where the marquee beckons callers to “Stay in the Future Today.” The manager, Bobby, played by Willem Dafoe, takes photos of their room to document its emptiness. The next morning, Moonee and Halley return to the Magic Castle, move their possessions back into their room, and the month begins again.

Magic Castle residents are that part of the precarious fraction of the working class that hovers at the point between low-wage work and unemployment. Those with the fewest personal impediments can work at low-wage jobs. Others hustle and beg. Moonee and her friends creatively plead for food at local fast-food joints and panhandle for ice cream treats to

share. Halley buys boxes of perfume in bulk and tries to sell them, with a large markup, to patrons of a local luxury hotel—all the while playing cat-and-mouse with hotel security. She tries to get any available government benefits. But Halley cannot even get a bus pass out of the penurious government worker. All the while, Moonee and her friends play each day with a divine anarchic energy, making the best of what they can scavenge.

Precious few good movies offer realistic portrayals of life in this large stratum of the working class. Many that do so focus on poor people with frustrated gifts. “Paterson”, Jim Jarmusch’s excellent movie about a bus driver who is a gifted poet, or “Patti Cake\$”, about a talented New Jersey girl trying to survive and flourish with a group of maladjusted friends, are rare examples. “The Florida Project” focuses wider and more generically, highlighting those trying to survive in the age of inequality and anxiety on modern skid row. This is a big group: Estimates are that more than fifty million Americans live in poverty today. Even the musical artist Drake announced he was “obsessed” with the movie, because “it taught me something about a world I would never think of and what it was like to live there.”

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Politically, this group is contested by both left and right. J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* provides another snapshot of this caste. And the right wing, including Vance, courts the white sectors of the immiserated class, inundating contemporary society with narratives of people sold out by a distant elite. On the left, this stratum is the focus of the laudatory Fight for \$15 campaigns. (Disclosure: both my daughter and I have been representing workers in such a campaign in Little Rock.) Like the characters in “The Florida Project”, these fast-food workers are often severely bruised by their life in this caste, making any advancement difficult. Many

fast-food workers carry minor legal marks from brushes with the legal authorities, so that when they do strike and managers call the police, many workers literally have to run and scatter so as not to be jailed for past minor legal transgressions, resembling the fugitive experiences of Halley and Moonee.

The film addresses metaphorically the smarmy paternalism of those who cannot imagine why such people are so “deluded” politically. It shows that given what the system offers them, there is little difference between Trump’s reactionary regime and what came before. When the kind social worker comes, with police escort, to put Moonee into foster care, the girl flees. She does not trust the state. She escapes, sneaking into Disney World to go see the real “Magic Castle”—a potent symbol for working-class and poor peoples’ search for satisfaction in an unsatisfactory political environment.

Progressives need to reverse their narrative of stupidity and reach for deeper understanding. On close examination, one can see the profound morality produced by membership in the impoverished stratum. A community forms and reforms itself, producing collective ethics and solidarity. In the Magic Castle community, protection of children is the first commandment, and fierce love and exemplary kindness exist between parents and children. Personal deeds matter. The hero of the movie is not the social worker but manager Bobby, whose compassion and strength of character keep a roof over the heads of Moonee and her mom. He protects them from state-sponsored eviction, tries to keep bedbugs out, and drives away a demonic pedophile.

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But poverty is not a peaceable kingdom. Disputes occur, such as whether prostitution is proper in Halley’s room, or whether it is acceptable to steal from one’s employer. One morning when Moonee and her mother are especially hungry, they slip into the luxury hotel for a magnificent brunch in which they stuff themselves. The audience wonders how they could eat so much but feels a tug of concern that they stole the meal. In Moonee’s caste, stealing for food is not a sin.

Any successful progressive movement must understand the reality facing this growing group, stop the reflexive mockery, and speak to their condition in a way that promotes their agency for change. This is not an easy task. But any narrative of resistance must honestly offer a glimpse of what can actually lead to changes in the lives of these people who fight daily for a little control in their difficult existences. What matters, beyond economic indicators of rising misery, is the texture: the daily worries and hopes that are the stuff of how class inequality feels. “The Florida Project” does not answer the political question, but it does invite the viewer in to the world of America’s economically marginal and desperate—a world that is growing, and becoming, in one way or another, all of ours.

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