



## COMMODITY FETISHISM AND HYDRIC IDEOLOGY: A MATERIALIST READING OF FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE ANIMATED MOVIE *RANGO*

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

This research work endeavours to conduct a symptomatic reading of the 2011 animated film *Rango* through the theoretical praxes of Marx and Engels' critique of political economy and the broader corpus of Western Marxism. Deploying an interdisciplinary critical methodology spanning semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, and ideology critique, the analysis will excavate how *Rango* operates as a multi-layered dialectic between capitalist reification and the proletariat impulse towards revolutionary class consciousness. At the paradigmatic level, the text will be deconstructed as an anthropomorphized allegory for the structural violence and systemic immiseration inflicted upon the working masses under capitalist commodity fetishism. The homologous narrative trajectory of the protagonist reptilian's imaginary misrecognition and subsequent ideological interpellation will be parsed to allegorize the materialist dialectic of history and Marxist humanism's emancipatory teleology. Specifically, close hermeneutic analysis will exhume how the film's antagonistic water capitalists reify hydric means of production into fictive exchange-value commodities. Their dissemination of false socially constructed scarcity myths and inequitable distribution mechanisms will be framed as replicating capitalism's core strategies of surplus extraction via manufactured deprivation and the proletarian Spaltung [1] (fragmentation). This semiology of the filmic text will illuminate how its surreal aesthetics of the Real unmask capitalist interpellative ideologies as Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses reifying false consciousnesses. *Rango's* metaphorical overcoming of this mystification represents the apotheosis of a materialist praxis oriented towards the permanent revolutionary reconstitution of new socio-economic relations emancipated from the fetters of capital.

**Keywords:** *Rango, False Consciousness, Water Politics, Animated Movie, Hegemony*

#### Introduction

False consciousness is a seminal concept propounded by the German philosophical theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their critique of political economy and capitalist modes of production. It elucidates the paradoxical phenomenon wherein the proletariat, the subjugated working class in the capitalist hierarchy, fails to perceive or acknowledge their oppression and systemic exploitation at the hands of the bourgeois ruling class that owns the means of production (Lukács 50-60). This notion of a distorted consciousness that obscures the objective realities of class conflict and economic subjugation finds its roots in Marx's theory of ideology and his contention that the "ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class" (Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology* 64). The ideological superstructure, comprising the realms of politics, law, culture, and religion, serves to propagate and legitimize the material base constituted by the economic relations that favour capital accumulation.

Consequently, the prevalence of bourgeois ideology inculcates in the proletarian psyche a false consciousness – a form of self-imposed false perception where the worker remains oblivious to the true nature of labour commodification and surplus value extraction intrinsic to capitalism. This delusion sustains the status quo by generating the "consent" of the oppressed masses and pre-empting revolutionary praxis aimed at the overthrow of capital (Gramsci 12-13). Overcoming this false consciousness necessitates the development of a revolutionary "class consciousness" wherein the proletariat transcends its fragmented "class-in-itself" existence to become a "class-for-itself" (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* 211), a unified socio-political force cognizant of its vanguard role in abolishing the present state of affairs and ushering in a socialist reconstruction of society.

*Rango* himself initially embodies the state of false consciousness. As a domesticated chameleon, he is alienated from his true nature and identity. Instead, he constructs an imaginary persona as a swashbuckling hero straight out of the Western fiction he mindlessly consumes. This delusion allows *Rango* to escape and distract himself from his mundane reality as a caged pet. His

false consciousness is a coping mechanism against the stifling constraints of his proletariat existence. When Rango stumbles into the town of Dirt, the inhabitants immediately buy into his fabricated gunslinger act, bestowing upon him the role of sheriff. This represents how the populace's own false consciousness allows them to be easily deceived by fictional narratives and heroes.

The unseen villains manipulating the water supply exploit this false consciousness, controlling the townsfolk through manipulated fear and ideological myths about water scarcity. This mirrors how the capitalist ruling class uses dominant narratives to obscure real material conditions and power structures. Rango's journey becomes one of progressively shedding his delusional fantasies and embracing his authentic chameleon identity and abilities. This illustrates the Marxist idea of developing revolutionary class consciousness to pierce through false consciousness. In the end, Rango uses truth and solidarity to unite the town against the wealthy villains hoarding resources. His transition represents the proletariat overcoming false consciousness and ideology to directly confront capitalist oppression. So, in many ways, Rango's bizarre adventure serves as an allegory for the journey from being trapped in a state of false consciousness to attaining legitimate class consciousness and revolting against capitalist control of resources and means of production. The theme proves central to the film's storytelling and symbolic meaning.

### **The Water Capitalist's<sup>[2]</sup> grip over the means of production**

The water capitalist's control over the means of production, specifically water, is a powerful analogy for the Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation. In the desert town of Dirt, water represents the most critical means of production, as it is the vital resource that sustains all life and economic activity in this arid environment. By monopolizing ownership and regulation of the water supply, the anonymous antagonists wield immense power and leverage over the town's inhabitants, mirroring the bourgeois capitalist class's dominion over the means of production in industrialized societies (Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* 105). This exclusive control enables the water barons to dictate the terms of access and distribution, essentially commodifying water as a scarce resource to be allocated based on economic rather than humanitarian principles. The townsfolk, bereft of any ownership stake in this essential means of production, are rendered utterly dependent on the whims of the water capitalists, compelled to exchange their labour or possessions to secure this fundamental necessity. As defined by Bottomore, this dynamic encapsulates the core Marxist notion of the proletariat's alienation from the means of production which strips workers of their agency and autonomy, forcing them into a position of subservience to the capitalist class that owns the "factories, land, and resources" (Bottomore, 119).

The water capitalists' ability to manufacture artificial scarcity, even in the face of adequate reserves, underscores the inherent tendency of capitalist systems to prioritize profit maximization over human needs (Marx, *Capital* 799). By creating an illusion of scarcity, they can artificially inflate the exchange value of water, compelling the townsfolk to pay exorbitant prices or engage in exploitative labor arrangements, all while obscuring the reality that sufficient water exists to meet everyone's basic requirements. This practice echoes Marx's critiques of how capitalists generate surplus value by underpaying workers and manipulating market forces, ultimately accumulating wealth through the "systematic extraction of surplus labor from the working class" (Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* 84).

In this allegorical tale, Rango's ultimate challenge becomes dismantling the water capitalists' monopolistic grip over the means of production, a struggle that mirrors the Marxist revolutionary goal of transferring ownership and control of productive forces from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat collective. The desert town's path to emancipation hinges on reclaiming democratic governance over this vital resource, a symbolic parallel to the Marxist vision of a socialist society where the workers collectively own and manage the means of production for the common good, rather than the enrichment of a select capitalist class.

### **Creation of artificial scarcity to maximize the surplus**

A core tenet of Marx's critique of capitalism is the notion that capitalists actively manufacture and perpetuate conditions of artificial scarcity to increase profits, even when sufficient resources exist to meet societal needs (Marx, *Capital* 762–870). This tendency is strikingly embodied in *Rango* through the water capitalists' deliberate creation of an artificial water shortage in the desert town of Dirt, despite ostensibly having access to adequate water reserves. By falsely portraying water as an extremely scarce commodity, the villainous capitalists can inflate its extrinsic exchange value, compelling the desperate townsfolk to pay inflated prices or enter into exploitative labor contracts to procure this vital resource. This manipulation of scarcity allows the water barons to maximize surplus extraction from the proletariat inhabitants, echoing Marx's analysis of how "the rate of surplus-value...depends...on the extent to which the conditions of production may be extended" (Marx, *Capital* 659). Moreover, the ideological obfuscation surrounding this artificial shortage exemplifies what Marx termed the "fetishism of commodities" (Marx, *Capital* 163–177), wherein the social relations and modes of production underlying a commodity's creation are obscured. By propagating narratives attributing the water crisis to environmental factors like drought, the water capitalists veil the reality that plentiful water exists, preventing the townsfolk from recognizing the artificial scarcity as a contrivance designed to fuel capitalist accumulation.

This manufactured scarcity also breeds social divisiveness, as the unequal allocation of water pits different animal groups against one another, preventing unified proletariat resistance - a phenomenon Marx noted: "The working men have no country...they cannot be...emancipated from the misery surrounding that condition" until recognizing their common economic subjugation (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 26). The water capitalist thus creates an environment of "social antagonism" rooted in their monopolistic control over life's means of subsistence (Engels 217). Eventually, the water capitalist's ability to contrive scarcity while obscuring the true material conditions exemplifies what prominent Marxist theorist David Harvey terms

“accumulation by dispossession” – the private appropriation of social wealth under capitalist social relations (Harvey, *The New Imperialism* 137). Rango’s quest to unmask and overcome this artificial crisis represents the proletariat struggle to pierce ideological veils and regain democratic control over vital means of production and subsistence.

### **Ideological manipulation and the imposition of false consciousness**

A central aspect of Marx’s critique of capitalist hegemony is the notion that the ruling class employs dominant ideologies and cultural narratives to obscure the realities of class conflict and economic exploitation, thereby promoting a false consciousness among the proletariat. This process of ideological manipulation is vividly illustrated in Rango through the water capitalists’ dissemination of manufactured narratives that obfuscate their monopolistic control over water resources. Specifically, the water barons propagate the ideology that the town’s water scarcity stems from external environmental factors like drought, rather than their own artificial hoarding practices. As Gramsci notes, such “common sense” narratives promulgated by the ruling class become entrenched as hegemonic ideologies that legitimize oppressive power structures (Gramsci 333). By attributing the crisis to natural causes beyond their control, the water capitalists present scarcity as an inescapable reality, suppressing recognition of their exploitative motives. This false scarcity myth extends capitalist reification, where social relations are “misrepresented as relations between things” (Lukacs 116). Water is framed as a finite commodity divorced from its vital role as the means of production sustaining all life in the desert town’s political economy. The ideological concealment of the water barons’ artificial manufacturing of scarcity obscures the social relations and productive forces underlying the crisis.

Additionally, the different animal societies’ internalization of this dominant narrative illustrates how ideologies are “the ideas of the ruling class” that become “the ruling ideas” (Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology* 64). Each group unquestioningly accepts the scarcity premise from their class standpoint, whether perceiving it as a noble struggle for resources or as proof of their systemic oppression. This multifaceted false consciousness atomizes collective proletariat interests. The water capitalists’ resort to supernatural coercion further exemplifies Althusser’s theory of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, where an ideology’s contradictions necessitate the deployment of overt repressive force by the capitalist state (Althusser 142-143). Rango’s journey represents the arduous struggle to develop a revolutionary class consciousness that demystifies these dominant ideological constructs and the economic relations they veil.

The manufactured ideology around water scarcity propagated by the water capitalists is a prime example of the very “false consciousness” that Marx argued prevented the proletariat from recognizing their true class interests and economic subjugation under capitalism. By disseminating the false narrative that drought alone is responsible for the town’s lack of water, the ruling water barons obscure the reality that they themselves are orchestrating an artificial scarcity through their monopolistic control over water resources. This dominant ideological myth serves to rationalize and legitimize the status quo power structure. As Marx noted, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64). The scarcity premise becomes the “ruling idea” that shapes the town’s consciousness, diverting attention from the underlying capitalist relations of production and surplus extraction. Each animal group internalizes this false consciousness from their respective class positions - the wealthier elite accepting it as natural, the working underclass resigning to their oppression. This fragmentation of interests prevents a unified revolutionary “class consciousness” from emerging against their common capitalist exploiters (Lukacs 60). The water capitalists’ deployment of the muscle further reflects Althusser’s thesis that when ideology alone fails to maintain false consciousness, the capitalist state must resort to overt repressive force to suppress counterhegemonic ideologies (Althusser 142-143).

Rango’s personal journey from a delusional persona to an enlightened revolutionary leader literally embodies the proletariat’s ideological awakening which is the painful process of shedding false consciousness and developing a transcendent class consciousness capable of piercing the capitalist veil of ideology. His ultimate unmasking of the water capitalists’ manufactured scarcity represents the critical Marxist objective of demystifying the dominant false narratives that obscure capitalist relations of production and exploitation (Marx, *Capital* 165).

### **Fragmentation of the populace to avoid revolution**

A key strategy employed by the ruling water capitalists is to deliberately divide and fragment the different animal groups within the town, preventing a unified proletariat resistance from emerging against their capitalist exploitation. This intentional sowing of divisions echoes Marx’s observation that the bourgeoisie actively “keeps the proletariat in a state of dispersion” to obstruct class consciousness (Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* 98). Specifically, the water barons inequitably distribute water resources across the various communities, spurring tensions and resentments that divert focus from the true source of oppression. Dividing the working class through artificially constructed identities and antagonisms serves to perpetuate wage-slavery by obstructing the development of genuine solidarity. This fragmentation manifests in how each group views the water crisis through the narrow lens of their assigned socioeconomic positioning. The elite tortoise society downplays scarcity as a trivial challenge, their privilege blinding them to the stark realities of deprivation. Conversely, the impoverished underbelly views it as further proof of systemic injustice against them. Such divergent ideological perceptions rooted in discrete material conditions exemplify Marx’s assertion that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but...their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 503). Rather than a unified class awareness, false consciousness reigns, with each group’s fragmented interests and grievances obscuring the overarching reality of capitalist subjugation.

This lack of “class consciousness” and internecine conflicts fractures the proletariat’s revolutionary potential by preventing them from transcending their “class-in-itself” existence and coalescing into a mobilized “class-for-itself” united against their capitalist oppressors (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* 211). The water barons thus exploit these socially-constructed divisions to deflect threats to their hegemony. Rango’s journey involves surmounting these intentionally fragmented identities by articulating an inclusive revolutionary praxis that universalizes the desert critters’ shared oppression under capitalist resource control. His unifying resistance represents the proletariat overcoming false consciousness by recognizing their common class interests. In due course, the water capitalists’ deliberate fragmentation of the town epitomizes the Marxist critique of how ruling class ideologies and material deprivation foster disunity that obstructs revolutionary class consciousness from materializing against capitalist domination.

The allegorical tale of Rango provides a rich narrative terrain to explore and analyze core Marxist concepts around capitalist oppression and the perpetuation of false consciousness among the proletariat masses. Through the water capitalists’ nefarious machinations, the film vividly captures the insidious strategies by which the ruling class obfuscates economic realities and class relations to maintain its systemic exploitation. By manufacturing an artificial scarcity around water, the vital means of production, the villainous capitalists are able to commodify this essential resource and extract surplus value from the desperate townsfolk. Their propagation of dominant narratives attributing the crisis to environmental factors exemplifies how ideology serves to obscure capitalism’s fundamental dynamics. Fragmenting the populace through inequitable water distribution sows divisions that splinter revolutionary class consciousness. And their ultimate deployment of supernatural coercion reflects the capitalist state’s use of repressive force when ideology fails. Rango’s own journey from delusional daydreamer to enlightened revolutionary leader metaphorically charts the proletariat’s struggle to shed false consciousness and attain mobilized class consciousness capable of overthrowing capitalist domination of the means of production.

### Conclusion

On a deeper level, *Rango* operates as an anthropomorphic allegory for the Marxist critique of capitalist hegemony which demonstrates how the economic imperatives of capital breed resource scarcity, ideological manipulation, social divisiveness, and eventually violent repression in service of surplus accumulation. Yet it also embodies the revolutionary optimism that collective mass praxis can demystify the capitalist superstructure and its false realities. By animating these abstract theoretical concepts through an absurdist comedic Western pastiche, the film simultaneously entertains and elucidates the perpetual struggle between the ruling class’s propagation of false capitalist consciousness and the proletariat’s emancipatory goal of transcendent revolutionary class consciousness.

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### References

#### Notes

1. Spaltung is a German word that literally translates to “splitting” or “division.” In Marxist theory, it refers specifically to the fragmentation or division of the working class (the proletariat).
2. The unseen antagonistic force that has monopolized control over the desert town’s water supply, allowing them to artificially manufacture scarcity and exert oppressive power over the citizens by commodifying this vital natural resource. From now on, we will address him by this name.

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