

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL (IN)JUSTICE AND ITS PORTRAYALS IN TODD PHILLIPS'S JOKER

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ABSTRACT:

The main objective of the present study is to reflect on the problem of social justice and the ways it is portrayed in *Joker* (2019, directed by Todd Phillips). A discourse analysis is used in order to identify the particular elements of social injustice and social unrest within the movie in question. Social injustices which were deeply felt within the atmosphere of the movie and the social explosion which followed social injustices instigated a social movement. Contrary to the general belief, the social movement was identified with tyranny. By designating the social movements as illegal, the movie established a type of identification which would attribute legitimacy to homicides. Being just and having equal opportunities in the distribution of societal resources come to the forefront. This 'web' of relations signifies the position of the individual and society *vis-à-vis* the state, and assures that the individual enters into the public sphere. Along with the disparity and the lack of resources in terms of equal opportunities, an individual's attitude follows a positive or negative path in the public sphere. In the movie *Joker*; a world in which the concept of social justice had fallen apart was pictured. By establishing identification with Joker's psychological disorders, the social movement which was experienced hereby was presented as a tyranny to the moviegoers. In this study, together with the analysis of the movie, the concepts of "social justice" and "social movement" will be discussed.

KEY WORDS:

Joker the movie, social justice, social movement, social recognition, violence

Social Justice as a Concept and Its Fundamentals

Opinions and democracy talks which were pronounced while discussing the concept of "justice" occupied the position of the dominant matter of the new capitalist world. The concept of "social justice" came into existence along with attempts to eliminate the inequality in the access to the right to life which arose from the new capitalist world. Initially, "justice" can be understood as the moral value of certain actions; in



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this sense, it can be termed as personal justice or a moral obligation.¹ In his book titled *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls tries to answer what the main social justice principles can be as principles which designate the basic construct of the society. The conventional social contract theory which was developed by Locke, Rousseau and Kant served as the basis of Rawls's proposal on social justice principles which specified how the burdens and benefits arising from societal cooperation would be distributed.² As per this proposal, social justice principles are principles on which free and rational individuals will agree by coming together on an equal footing. What is important is to be just or to seem at least to be as 'if just' in the distribution of resources in a capitalist world. Seeming to be as 'if just' is easier than really being so. In our opinion, there certainly exist living quarters inhabited by individuals who are situated in or around big cities and subsist on minimum living conditions, and mystery is also added to that by calling these places 'dystopias'. Such 'dystopias' in which resources are not equally distributed and which are kept out of sight are regions in which the image that social justice is provided is protected to the extent that they are kept hidden and oppressed. In fact, Bell asserted that a society whose members were all physically, spiritually and socially safe and where resources were equally distributed was equitable. Even though Bell offers a hypothetical definition of the situation, individuals who subsist on below-minimum living conditions are confronted with societal adaptation problems as soon as they intermingle with the social world. Bell does not only mention the equal distribution of resources but also states that the equal distribution of resources secures the spiritual satisfaction and mental well-being, physical health and a sense of equality in the social world. Constantly growing inequalities without social justice threaten social harmony. Without social participation and freedom, societal development is fragile and continuously under risk. Individuals who remain out of the circle of social justice usually experience conflicts with the rest of society.³ The phenomenon of "social justice" plays a role which prevails over individual and social identities. The confrontation with individual identity in the private domain depends on rights which are either given or ungiven in terms of social justice. Also, in terms of an individual's social identity, the existence of social justice is again of importance to having access to the public sphere and obtaining roles in this sphere. Reeve, who adopts a positive approach toward this state of conflict from the standpoint of countries which remain out of the machinery of capitalism, asserts that fellow citizens can have the tendency to be concerned with an equality understanding of each other in contrast to developed capitalist societies, and each good or bad situation encountered by any fellow citizen is even the shared concern of every fellow citizen.⁴ This remark offers the best summary of the construction process of the societal in the domain of an ideal democratic life at moral level.

The concept of "social justice" displayed differences from family to family, person to person and society to society throughout history. Justice is the function of moral requirements. These moral requirements are essential to living in a secure society. Laws, rules, traditions and conventions meet these requirements. Therefore, the concept of a social state was proposed, and the state was expected to guarantee that citizens would have equality in rights. The concept of "justice" is buttressed and reinforced alongside the concept of "equality". However, the justice granted by laws can reach dimensions likely to undermine the equality principle. That is why the need to adhere to social justice more firmly for the basic purpose of having equal access to resources comes into being. Social justice which guarantees an individual's entire life functions as a moral requirement was composed of four basic elements, that is, "desert", "need", "legal rights" and "equality". Miller, who used these four elements for the first time, puts forward that "desert" and "need" are relative concepts in the case of absolute "equality". It is highly difficult to calculate "desert" and "need" quantitatively in comparative terms. Here, the calculation of an individual's performance comes into play, and an absolutely equal distribution will be really just for people who have identical abilities and performance for executing the same job. Alongside this remark, Miller focused his viewpoint on the deterioration of the state-

society relationship which was instigated by the rise of neo-liberalism in the Cold War era to a certain extent, and caused the social state understanding to be forgotten.⁵ In fact, the equality principle is not solely made up of the cycle between labour and earnings. It is essential that the state provides its citizens also with basic needs such as the care for elderly, education or medical and food aid, and these needs cannot be calculated in terms of such a cycle. In this sense, neo-liberalism generates inequalities, social and racial exclusion as well as the proliferation of insecure jobs.⁶ Stopping social aids alongside exclusions which are based on performance calculations, racial discriminations or societal genders will give rise to societal 'hypothermia'.

*"The principle of justice demands responsibility for the consequences one's actions may have on the condition of others."*⁷ Ethics in societal life is in need of rules, laws, jurisdiction and also institutions which establish and check them all. These institutions are state agencies. Additionally, the idea of ethics becomes concrete in the form of social justice or is reinterpreted in a way to be transformed into social justice in the larger domain of society.⁸ At this juncture, it is asserted that social justice is closely related to ethical norms. That is why it is stated that ethical rules will be undermined and income distribution will be skewed in societies without social justice which is addressed to every member of society; and there will be increases in crimes such as tax evasion and bribery in the society. According to Rawls, justice in society does not require everybody to be absolutely equal, and some social and economic differences, that is, certain inequalities, can also be legitimate, and this situation is legitimate as long as this inequality is to have consequences in favour of the human being situated at the lowest level of society.⁹ In this sense, discrepancies between the rich and the poor can be deemed socially 'just' in the context of certain 'awards' which motivate people in their jobs or make them entrepreneurial in the society; for instance, to pursue goals such as making money. However, the precondition for this situation is that inequalities have the trait of being beneficial to the poorest people. Rawls proposes two different principles of social justice. While one of these two principles requires the equal distribution of basic rights and duties, social and economic inequalities are ethically acceptable as for the other principle only if they favor the most disadvantaged members of the society. Bauman complements Rawls's ideas by asserting that the load carrying capacity of a bridge would be measured on the basis of its weakest column; likewise, the human quality of a society should be measured on the basis of the life quality of its weakest members. The essence of ethics was the responsibility assumed by human beings for the promotion of others' well-being, this was also the measure of the ethical standards of society and this measure was the only tool needed by the welfare state.¹⁰ On the other hand, the enhancement of social justice at national levels means strengthening institutions whether they are schools, judiciary, ministries or other stakeholders. According to Craig, Rawls, building on Hume, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, and other moral philosophers, argued that (social) justice meant 'fairness': *"the principle subject of justice is the basic structure of society (...) the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social co-operation"*,¹¹ that is, he was not concerned with the benefits to be derived for individuals from private association.

However, Social Darwinism towards which liberal thinking pushed us step by step is positioned in stark contrast to this idea. As per liberal thinking, the main obstacle to freedom and equality is the state apparatus which acts irrespective of the framework of security and justice. The state is a factor which should be taken out of life and especially of the economic sphere as much as possible. Liberal democracy, which is common practice in the current world political system, and the liberal understanding of economy, which presents the practical aspect of this system in the area of economics, make us move closer to Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism which is best represented by Spencer accommodates the economic system of capitalism in which no state regulation of the economy is made and no effective social justice mechanism functions. This system in which each individual is responsible for 'saving themselves' prescribes the 'elimination' of those who are

1 RENAULT, E.: *The Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 67.

2 See: RAWLS, J.: *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, London : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

3 BELL, L. A.: Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education. In ADAMS, M. et al. (eds.): *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York : Routledge, 2016, p. 3.

4 REEVE, C. D. C.: Plato. In BOUCHER, D., KELLY, P. (eds.): *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 65-66.

5 See: MILLER, D.: *Principles of Social Justice*. Cambridge : Oxford University Press, 1999.

6 CUMMINS, I.: *Mental Health Services and Community Care: A Critical History*. Bristol : Bristol University Press, 2020, p. 9.

7 BAUMAN, Z., TESTER, K.: *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2004, p. 67.

8 BAUMAN, Z.: *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* Cambridge, London : Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 45.

9 RAWLS, J.: *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, London : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 95-98.

10 BAUMAN, Z.: *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2008, p. 160.

11 CRAIG, G.: Poverty, Social Work and Social Justice. In *British Journal of Social Work*, 2002, Vol. 32, No. 6, p. 669.

‘unsuccessful’. The concepts used by Darwin in relation to nature are transferred by Social Darwinists to societal processes. Along with this transfer, Social Darwinists attribute concepts such as “life struggle” and “selection” to individuals and social classes inside society. Spencer asserts that those successful in societal and economic competition will continue to survive and make progress. Those who fail in this struggle will be selected and eliminated.¹² Phenomena such as poverty and sickness are perceived as personal mistakes rather than the consequences of economic or social inequalities.

The Essence of Social Movements and Their Connection with Social Justice

Social movements are acknowledged as indispensable and constructive tools for enabling participants to express their concerns and to achieve societal change in a democratic society which encourages mass participation in all societal and political problems. Various interest groups in society can come together and organise protests that react to shared problems such as social justice, troubles in the functioning of democracy and laws unfavourable to citizens. This is the shared and legitimate right of those who are oppressed alongside the same erroneous acts.

In the 21st century, human beings from every part of the world recognised the concept of “social movement” as a high-pitched call, as a call for action intended for tackling various problems with broad participation, and as a weight to be pressed against repressive power.¹³ Marx and McAdam offer the following definition: “*Social movements can be defined as organised efforts to promote or resist change in society that rely, at least in part, on non-institutionalised forms of political action.*”¹⁴ In this sense, there are two key elements which give rise to social movements, that is, the level of social welfare and the level of economic welfare. The synergy between these two elements is a factor important to the instigation of social movements. Maintaining these two elements at healthy levels should be guaranteed and supported by the state apparatus with the social state understanding. Individuals in society can resort to social movements for the purpose of claiming their rights within the construct of a democratic state, that is to say, for demanding social and economic welfare. Besides, it is also necessary to have a person or construct that will initiate and guide social movements. All announcements, shared posts and information about social movements are disseminated between individuals with a snowball effect and define the shape of the organisation. Concerns make up the basis of most social movements. Alongside these concerns, emphasis is placed on societal inequality and social injustice. The economy is placed at the top of the primary concerns. Likewise, Peoples puts the societal inequality problems at the centre of social movements as a source of concern.¹⁵ Economic resources are important to social movements. At first sight, this can seem paradoxical. Social movements typically appeal to groups of people with limited economic resources; therefore, these human groups partake in the non-conventional policy of a social movement rather than directly applying to decision-makers. Moreover, as indicated also by the relative deprivation theory, being at the wrong end of societal inequality is the primary source of motivation for joining a social movement. Each social problem, which serves as a source of motivation, has the characteristic of a social contract for individuals who are engaged with a social movement and determines the direction of the social movement. However, from certain perspectives, social movements can be characterised as being fragmented rather than having unity and harmony, and are represented by different groups that are in a loose relationship with each other alongside different interests within this fragmented construct to be accepted by many people as a ‘post-modern turn’.¹⁶ Within the context of this representation, a “social movement” is an

12 See: SPENCER, H.: *The Man versus the State*. London: Penguin, 1969.

13 TILLY, C.: *Social Movements, 1768 – 2004*. London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004, p. 4.

14 THOMPSON, N.: Social Movements, Social Justice and Social Work. In *British Journal of Social Work*, 2002, Vol. 32, No. 6, p. 712.

15 PEOPLES, C. D.: Classical and Contemporary Conventional Theories of Social Movements. In BERBEROGLU, B. (ed.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Movements, Revolution, and Social Transformation*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, p. 31.

16 THOMPSON, N.: Social Movements, Social Justice and Social Work. In *British Journal of Social Work*, 2002, Vol. 32, No. 6, p. 712.

act of conflict in which the historical space of cultural inclinations is transformed by the social movement itself into a societal organisation format.¹⁷ This conflict comes into existence in cases when the pressure of those in power in society becomes either intensified or inadequate, and looks for the opportunity to explode when society loses its hopes. Just as in the case of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, a social movement may not always cover the whole of society by and large. It can occur also within a limited group that has a shared thought or problem. Social movements are now an established part of the political scene and can be seen to have chalked up a number of important successes over the years in relation to their specific goals and the pursuit of social justice more generally.¹⁸

Joker and Social Explosion on the Edge of Social Injustice

In the movie, we watch the ‘inner journey’ story in which Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix) is transformed into Joker who is, without question, one of the most fascinating and complex evil characters present in both comic books and mainstream cinema. The story offered by the movie about the birth of the antihero pertains to the fact that the society in which we live itself creates the cruel evilness. Via a narration which flows from the background and gradually occupies a more central place throughout the movie, we learn about strikes, mass demonstrations and the tight political climate triggered by a financial crisis in Gotham City. As the mass movement gets radicalised, we are offered the opportunity to empathise and be identified with Arthur Fleck who is pushed, shoved and insulted in scenes which are narrated by making fun of the situation where the oppressed are despised in this system.

The first social movement which catches the eye in the movie is the strike organised by garbage collectors. This information is obtained from an announcement on radio news. In the news bulletin released through radio, demands for rights by garbage collectors who are on strike are not referred to. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the fact that the city and its most beautiful parts, which are occupied by the rich, are full of garbage, and also rats are coming above ground as a consequence of the accumulating trash. Television was used as well. The dominant aspect is the talk show on TV hosted by Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro) who reminds us of P. T. Barnum. The show which induces the spectators solely to laugh and to ‘burst forth’ is presented as a typical example of mass culture. The relative weight of the TV show in the movie is actually the element which seduces the proletariat. To what extent the values which are directly linked with mass production and consumption are important will automatically come into view if the effect of TV which seduces the proletariat and precludes the proletariat from radicalising is considered together with the effect of cinema, radio and newspapers. That is why cultural critics such as Mills¹⁹ and Adorno²⁰ lost confidence in the industrial worker class that had the revolutionary role, but drifted away towards mass culture, just as in the case of the allegory of ‘The Song of the Sirens’ created by Adorno and Horkheimer.²¹ In two separate sequences, we observe that the cinema is used in the movie; the first one is the image of the movie theatre from outside and there is a poster promoting a pornographic film. This movie theatre is on a crowded street which is poor and in which businesses are permanently closed down. In the other sequence, we see that rich people watch movies. They watch comedies and the movie theatre is ostentatious.

After a certain period, Arthur Fleck exits from mental hospital without remembering the reason for his hospitalisation and tries to adapt to society (the society in his dreams). However, the corruption of society precludes his normalisation efforts. In the context of this corruption, his transformation into a merciless

17 TOURAINE, A.: *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

18 THOMPSON, N.: Social Movements, Social Justice and Social Work. In *British Journal of Social Work*, 2002, Vol. 32, No. 6, p. 721.

19 See: MILLS, W. J.: *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*. Harcourt, New York: Brace and Company, 1948.

20 See also: ADORNO, T. W.: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London, New York: Routledge Classics, 2001.

21 ADORNO, T. W.: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London, New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, p. 6.

murderer comes into play in conjunction with the triple homicide committed by him for self-defense, the third of which was replete with hatred and grudge, and his homicides committed to re-experience the pleasure felt by him in relation to the previous murder. Since the victims of the first triple homicide are 'Wall Street type' businessmen, representatives of the 'system', the question 'who will take over the system' makes us think that the hole to be made in the 'system' will be filled by violence.

The triple homicide lays the groundwork for the instigation of a social movement and symbolises its initiation. In context of another appearance of television, the following remarks draw attention towards a TV interview presenting Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), the mayor candidate and the richest man in the city, who represents the 'system' and will take over it: "Someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kinds of people change for the better, those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns." These remarks portray rich people's devotion to and belief in Social Darwinism in society. Throughout the movie, Fleck establishes no real connection with the radical mass movement which is directly targeted at the rich. He states that he is not only uninformed about the activities occurring in the city but also believes nothing and has no relationship with the protests. When masses that shout "Death to the Rich!" are on the street, Arthur Fleck comes face-to-face with Thomas Wayne who is the actual representative of the 'system' and asks Wayne to admit that he is his father. Arthur Fleck does not revolt against the authority figure, rather he wants to be recognised by the authority; just like when the main protagonist dreamt of his comedian idol Murray Franklin saying that he would give up everything to be Fleck's father.

Strikes and social movements are not the only problems in the city; the municipality is in an economic crisis. That is why allowances allocated to social services are cut back and social service offices are closed. This practice demonstrates that activities which promote social justice do not function any more or are the first things to be given up.

Finally, the movie *Joker* does not go beyond reproducing the entrenched mainstream visual culture which reduces social movements down to the tyranny of certain useless masses that dart around. As per the precondition for social movements which was proposed by Arendt,²² the public sphere, in which social processes centred on society members connected to each other with a collective identity take place, and the social movements, which subsequently originate from the public sphere, must be bereft of violence. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. stated the following in one of his speeches: "Riots do not develop out of thin air... The riot is the language of the unheard... Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention."²³ Uprisings or social movements arise from a series of injustices and long-term negligence. Burning of cars and destroying or even setting on fire to workplaces or buildings were indicated as instances of tyranny and were identified with an individual who committed murders due to their psychological disorders.

Conclusion

Being the social movement, which reflects the atmospheric mood of the movie, the garbage collectors' strike is the first thing which captures the eye, and we see that it gradually occupies a central place as the movie proceeds. However, the strike has no interconnection with Arthur Fleck who is the movie's key protagonist. The reason for this pertains to his apolitical stance. The strike by garbage collectors gives viewers necessary information on the social and political circumstances of the case. The triple homicide committed by Arthur Fleck acts as a prologue to the social movement. When people aspire to be freed from the pressure of those in power and there are 'management' failures in democracy, social movements come into play. As per the outlook of the movie, social movements were presented as acts of vandalism. This comparison reflects the viewpoint of those in power, particularly in the USA, toward social movements. Even initially neglecting those who are on strike, i.e. focusing only on accumulated garbage signifies that those in power and the mainstream media which buttress those in power do not care about and do not even approve of a social movement such as the strike which is organised for the purpose of claiming rights and seeking justice.

22 See: ARENDT, H.: *The Human Condition*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1998.

23 GILEA, C.: *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Stanford – "The Other America" 1967*. [online]. [2020-08-15]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3H978KIR20>>.

From Arthur's social services consultant, we obtain information on social aids received by poor people living in the city. We see that it is the first institution which is sacrificed since the municipality faces an economic crisis. Even though social justice was promoted when the economy was in a good condition, this instance indicated that the first reaction in a crisis period was to sacrifice the service given to poor people. The remarks made by Thomas Wayne during the TV interview in the movie showed us the fact that social justice would serve only people who worked and succeeded. Moreover, remarks by Wayne let us know that he represents the authority overlap with performance calculation in Miller's social justice theory. In other words, emphasis was put on the cycle between labour and earning. To the extent that the individual works, they deserve to live. At this juncture, we can talk about economic selection which has the attributes of Social Darwinism. On the other hand, Gotham took on a course which was quite far away from Bell's concept of a just society in which resources were equally distributed. What holds for social movements also holds for social demands in general: they are concerned as much with what is recognised as unconditional rights as with the conditions of life.²⁴

The neglect expressed in the movie toward social justice and the growing inequalities threatened the social harmony. The social movement came into being together with discord. As previously highlighted, the departure point of the social movement is of high importance. A social movement which was accompanied by vandalism came into existence because it began with a triple homicide. Reflecting on it reminds us of a social explosion which goes beyond a social movement, especially if we consider that the symbol of activities is a cold-blooded killer who has a mental disorder and the slogan of protesters is "Death to the Rich!". On the other hand, all announcements, shared posts and pieces of information on the social movement should be disseminated between individuals and thus the organisational chart of the social movement comes to light. If we return to the movie, such type of organisational arrangement or information flow is not observed. However, according to Touraine, the social movement is an element essential to the construction of societal reality,²⁵ and the societal reality to be constructed for Gotham by activists will have violent consequences.

At first, Phoenix's Joker strives to be a good man and create his own success story. However, the previous Joker characters were bad from the moment they first appeared on the screen, and not enough information about their past is provided to the audience. The image has been created that man is born to be either good or evil. The old Jokers exist only to spread evil. In addition, Joaquin Phoenix's Joker suffers from deep psychoses and we are looking for the source of evil in these psychoses.

We cannot feel the concept of "social justice" in the films where Old Jokers appear; the audience only knows that criminals rule in the Gotham City and the crime rate is increasing day by day. However, social injustice clearly shows itself as the source of crime for Todd Phillips's Joker. In the film's narrative, the unequal distribution of economic resources, difficulties in accessing health services, and low salary or high unemployment rates make the concept of a social justice a debate. We see the situation in which the violence experienced in the movie's theme is the responsibility that people assume for the well-being of others, the essence of the morality that Bauman mentions, as an individual seeking their own justice illegally in situations where social injustice occurs.

The film's record-breaking box office performance creates a distinct contrast, because the poor and middle classes of today are placed in the face of a destroyed revolutionary working class. The struggle for the life of the poor and middle classes does not lie in revolutionism, but in a movie character with psychological problems. Just like critics such as Mills, Adorno and Horkheimer lost faith in the industrial working class and in its revolutionary role drifting away into mass culture, Hollywood today conveys the same blow to the poor and middle classes that the prospects of their own revolt can only be led by a psychopath. The main reason behind the movie's blockbuster status might have been that the target audience of Batman movies and/or Joker fans hoped to see again the violent and charismatic Joker portrayed by Heath Ledger or Jack Nicholson's Joker. The producers who took advantage of this gave the message that it would be better, even safer to survive in social injustice than to follow someone with clown make-up and mental problems.

24 RENAULT, E.: *The Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 87.

25 TOURAINE, A.: An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements. In *Social Research*, 1985, Vol. 52, No. 4, p. 749.

In conclusion, the concept of “social justice” was referred to as unnecessary budgetary allocation in the movie by authority figures and via representatives of the ‘system’. It was underlined by these authorities that those who were poor, weak and unskilled either did not have the right to life or should have lived below the minimum level. That is because the dominant viewpoint for both authorities and the mainstream media is that only those who are powerful and work in a manner the ‘system’ approves will be capable of surviving in it. The social explosion thus came into being together with the oppression of the poor and unskilled segment of society.

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