

What Forms of Violence Exist within Capitalism? Examining the Peterloo Massacre and the Flint Water Crisis

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Abstract

In pursuit of conventional research on capitalism, this ideology shall be viewed as “a way that enables us to produce novel goods; it also grants us liberty, which enables the economy to prosper.” Through conjugation with the denotation of this word, capitalism reflects an impression that the general public has misinterpreted; capitalism addresses a second layer of function which is closely related to the use of violence as one of its foundations. It was used to establish the entity known as the capitalistic market. The paper solely concentrates on Karl Polanyi’s statements about how the governments were required to “enforce compliance” to “make the markets work.” Thus, the concept of violence as part of its mechanism is a side effect of capitalism. It is never an accidental event that occurs along with other events that lead to its development. The Peterloo Massacre was initiated in 1819. The Flint Water Crisis started in 2014. The evaluation of the Flint Water Crisis and the Peterloo Massacre demonstrates how capitalism employs both structural and direct forms of violence in order to sustain its dominance over the populace. People in positions of authority can harm others without really using physical force, as seen in the Flint Water Crisis. These choices are made by racists who have an impact on the environment, bureaucrats, and politicians who simply worry about conserving wealth. The Flint Water Crisis argues that although there may be differences in appearance, the Flint Water Crisis and other comparable issues persist operating with the same fundamental systemic flaws. As long as we understand these dynamic components for identifying issues: wealth disparity, injustice regarding the environment and potential democratic accountability, it would play an essential role in critically reassessing traditional denotation of capitalism.

Keywords

Violence, Capitalism, Ideology

1. Introduction

Under the prevailing paradigm of economic and political thinking, capitalism has been presented as a natural process having great advantages in terms of technological innovation as well as the maximum satisfaction of individual liberties. However, all this serves as the ideological concealment of the utterly complex process that takes place under the surface of all these “capitalist” processes. According to the book *The Great Transformation* by Polanyi (1944), “The markets and capitalism were not discovered; they had to be created and maintained by deliberate state action and often brutal force.” In other words, it becomes clear that it was the process of capitalism that has utilized “brutal force” as opposed to the idea that it follows its course as a natural process without involving any semblance of violence.

Under the main category of violence, three major categories are closely linked to capitalism. The first type of violence is direct violence; it is a result of immediate and intentional action causing harm to others through war, assault and brutality of other kinds for the purpose of profit gains. Structural violence is apparent in the harm caused by political, social and resource distribution systems which place certain groups at a disadvantage. And capitalist violence centers the relation to wage labour, privatization of essential needs and dispossession of wealth within the working class.

Among the earliest types of such relations is that which is referred to as the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which more than 60,000 working-class people had gathered peacefully in Manchester to call for a particular type of political reform. Rather than responding to their appeals, the British government had chosen to suppress them through force, resulting in more than 15 deaths and innumerable wounded victims. It is in such ways that their control of property is ensured through force under the capitalist system that upholds democratic tenets.

The paper will try to investigate an important and relevant question: “In the past and today, what forms of violence exist within capitalism?” (1819) Through the observation of both past and recent examples, it is possible to determine that there are indeed both direct and structural means of violent capitalism both state-sanctioned massacres and environmental and economic abandonment. Both are key to the understanding of both capitalism as a means of economics and as a means of power and control. The two case studies were selected with Peterloo and Flint leading the discussion, directly illustrating how direct state violence appeared in the Peterloo Massacre’s repression of political protest, resonating with structural violence in which Flint water crisis’s unequal infrastructure neglect was involved. These two case studies merged to reinforce capitalist priorities and further exemplify how resource and wealth distribution was operated for the gains of profits while delivering harms through systemic deprivation.

2. Case Study One: The Peterloo Massacre (1819)

2.1. Historical and Economic Background

Early in the 19th century, there was a tremendous amount of profit amassed by

the factory owners as a result of the emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain, as well as the elite who owned the land, which was done at the expense of the working class, who found themselves poor and oppressed. The working class, who were for the most part based in Manchester, suffered from harsh conditions of labor, long hours, child labor, low wages, and a political system which was not representative of this class. Though this class represented a major section of society, this particular class lacked parliamentary representation whatsoever.

The condition for this particular class worsened with the passage of the Corn Law of 1815, which raised the price of food to a level amenable to the furtherance of the interest of the owners of the land in respect to the emergence of industrial capitalism because of the recession occasioned by the post-Napoleonic War. The workers, who realized that a chance for a peaceful yet democratic option represented the only glimmer of hope for economic relief, took a stand against this particular crisis. As E. P. Thompson observes in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1963), such policies intensified food insecurity and economic precarity, exacerbating class tensions and political exclusion.

2.2. The Event at St. Peter's Field

On August 16th, 1819, over 60,000 men, women, and children peacefully assembled at St. Peter's Field in Manchester calling for the needed reforms in Parliament. This was a movement supported by local reformers and radical Henry Hunt. It was a peaceful assembly of people who asked for economic and political reform in their peaceful demonstrations.

Yet, despite its peaceability, the movement revealed a more dangerous intent and antisocial character to certain members—most notably those Manchester magistrates under the sway of local industrial aristocrats—who presumed the entire assembly to be similarly driven by a French Revolution-style counter-social movement (Poole, 2019). When Henry Hunt began speaking to their assembly, they requested an arrest warrant to summon Manchester and Salford Yeomanry assistance in suppressing this perceived revolutionary group composed of mostly middle-class and military elements of their town (Cox, 2019).

These Yeomanry charged into this peaceful assembly of people deemed ill-trained and intoxicated, based on their further violent charge against those assembled with drawn sabers of their horses, pushing aside women and children in the process. Later on, they further requested assistance of “15th Hussars,” an active legion of the whole armed forces, to quell this “revolution” that raged within their peaceful town. At least 18 persons died in this series of violent demonstrations against peaceful assembly and protest by those anti-social elements of Manchester (Cox, 2019). At least 18 people died as a result of the violent attacks against the peaceful assembly (Cox, 2019). More than 400 people were injured during the attacks. Consequently, the event became known as the “Peterloo Massacre,” a satirical reference to the historic Battle of Waterloo, which had taken place four years earlier (Cox, 2019).

2.3. Analysis: State Violence and Capitalist Power

To the extent this issue is concerned, it can furthermore be asserted that the Peterloo incident revealed how the violence of the capitalist state functions against democracy when it comes to situations wherein the economic structure of the elite is being threatened. As can be gathered from Thompson's statement, "Working-class participants of the early Victorian period had intolerable pressures imposed on them by the dislocations of industry as well as by political exclusion." Thompson saw that it was especially the passage of the Corn Laws that resulted in an increase in insecurity regarding food security among working-class individuals, as they had their own set of issues when it came to wages and unemployment.

Such an ideological and political transformation made it impossible to have an immediate effect on survival at an economic level. The ruling elite did not have any interest in the peaceful gathering of the protesters. Instead of attaining policy shifts and political expression as political backing through demands, they had to fight against violence. As pointed out in Robert Poole's article *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Poole, 2019), "it is clear that the authorities had more interest in safeguarding property and order rather than being attentive to the concerns raised by protesters." On this point, the ruling elite thought that giving power to the workers meant distribution and possibly distribution itself. There is a need for the ruling elite to demonstrate power in order to end any manner of distribution and empowerment. Instead of it being an expression of no prejudice on the part of the magistrates' appeal to come out with horses, it can be argued that it is all about safeguarding the economic and political status of the industrial capital.

It was the belief that the protesters were peaceful reformers, and not some sort of militaristic revolutionary soldiers, that really typified the Peterloo massacre. It was pointed out by Poole that the organizers of protests had attempted to carry out the protest in an orderly and respectable fashion, to the extent that they had to employ stewards to keep the crowd in line. But this was still considered a declaration of war by the government. This juxtaposition makes clear that the meaning of capitalism to itself is a protector of law and order, when in fact it is a protector of wealth and power.

Relevance can also be noted in relation to the manner in which the character expresses the "moral economy." In the matter of the reformers, it appears that the existing economy is not a just economy, in the manner that capitalism is concerned with wealth and not lives, based on the inequality demonstrated through the manner of the elite classes responding when their expectation of the exploitation of the less privileged is brought to their attention. The massacre questions the reality of the economy of capitalism, which is based on concepts of force and not consent, since the concepts of democracy presented by the masses, evident through Peterloo, are always responded to through force along the path of history, since they offer objections or challenges against the established order.

From this case study, it is clear that the role of violence in capitalism is not only

an accident but a planned action to implement the agenda of formation. The British Government's response, which involves bloodshed, clearly indicates that the inequality of a capitalist society is maintained by its militarized control.

3. Case Study Two: Modern Systems of Control—The Flint Water Crisis and Environmental Racism

3.1. Structural Violence and Environmental Racism

Though the Peterloo Massacre was based upon a violent demonstration, violence under capitalism tends to have a propensity for exerting its effect indirectly and behind the scenes. These actions occur via bureaucratic and structural means. These practices occur due to a process of structural violence. A sort of conservative damage, this occurs due to being indirectly given via a structure of inequality that is implanted within institutions that are both economic and political. A type of this is derived from environmental racism.

That is a sign that industries that practice pollution and decayed infrastructure disproportionately affect poor communities of color. In capitalism, the injury that happens due to the environmental facet is deliberate, structurally marginal, comparatively, of course, towards those that have less power. Generally, a region such as this does not offer legal protection, proper representation, and a financial way to offer a fight against the government who initiates something negative and sets something harmful into motion. Such a region was exemplified during the Water Crisis of Flint ([United Nations Development Programme \[UNDP\], 2026](#)).

3.2. The Flint Water Crisis as Structural Violence

3.2.1. Background and Key Facts

In the year 2014, the state government came up with a move to address funding challenges through sourcing water not from Lake Huron but from the Flint River, which it had never used before. Although cheaper by a considerable margin, the water was highly toxic due to being stored in pipes, which was nothing short of poisonous. This gave a distinct odor and color to the water. The residents complained of water that had such properties, which was stained and had a terrible smell in addition to dermal irritations. However, this, like many other cases, has been overlooked, contrary to expectations, due to complaints not only from the residents but from experts as well. Again, officials of the relevant authority told them not to worry, claiming it was safe for human consumption.

The reason for the resulting massive lead exposure would not have occurred had this been the case. In addition, the corrosion inhibitor, which was mandatory under federal law to mix into the water, was not used. This violates federal law and caused the leaching of old pipes into the water distribution system, considering that thousands of people ended up poisoned by the water. The resulting impact of being in contact with this poison largely affects children, who are extremely vulnerable to the effects of this poison due to their developing brains ([Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016](#); [Pauli, 2020](#)).

3.2.2. Capitalist Logic and Policy-Driven Harm

Perhaps, the Flint Water Crisis did not include the aspect of police brutality as seen in the Peterloo Massacre, but it represents structural violence. This type of violence does, in fact, lack direct physical violence, since it comes from slowly being nurtured by environmental racism, austerity and capitalist cost-cutting. These three mechanisms constitute the types of violence. Environmental racism within capitalism can be related to unequal resource distribution within a predominantly marginalized community, proposing environmental risks. Austerity shows priority to fiscal restraint over public well-being, which reduces the capacity of public services for certain community groups, also presenting an example of policy-driven harm. Capitalist cost-cutting nonetheless is different from the previous two mechanisms; it is the operation of anti-human action which places economic gains and financial savings over mankind. These forms of violence noticed in the Flint community have their origins in economic policy made to ensure elite interests are met, relying on the ideology that public services like water must remain a cost center and never considered a basic human need (Gostin, 2016).

People who were made to suffer by the structural violence include, for the most part, poor Blacks, who comprise a population that falls under the bracket of disposables within the capitalist system. The ideology that led to the Flint Water Crisis considered corrosion protection too expensive, meaning the human body was evaluated as an economic expense (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2020).

3.2.3. Supporting Evidence

The neglect of safety measures was decided upon by the emergency managers and the Michigan State government because the city was facing cuts in its budget. As stated by Affron (2017), the use of corrosion control chemicals required under the Lead and Copper Rule was deemed too expensive, even though it cost approximately \$100 per day.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha identified rising blood lead levels in children, but her findings were dismissed by state administration until independent investigations confirmed them. This reflects the capitalist tendency to undermine science when it conflicts with economic interests.

Engineering firms contracted to assess Flint's water infrastructure approved unsafe systems while profiting from substandard conditions. (2017) The Michigan Civil Rights Commission concluded the crisis was the result of systemic racism, noting such neglect would not have occurred in a wealthier white community. This case demonstrates that modern capitalist violence is normalized, bureaucratic, and indirect. Structural neglect, austerity, and technocratic governance replace physical force, but the harm remains severe.

4. Conclusion

This research paper examined the relationship between capitalism and violence through the Peterloo Massacre and the Flint Water Crisis. Peterloo represents early industrial capitalism's reliance on overt state violence, which is in direct op-

position to Flint' illustration of modern structural and ideological violence. The Flint Water Crisis illustrates the structural and ideological violence the modern capitalistic system perpetuates. The violence in the form of the water crisis in Flint did not involve physical harm leading to death, but the effect was no less lethal. Cutting back for economic health reasons, turning a blind eye to health warnings, and the structural neglect shown to the poor Black population were all used as a weapon.

The Flint water crisis further indicates that the type and form of violence the capitalistic structure perpetuates today is neglect and turning a blind eye, as the system cares more about the market than about morality. These cases, in fact, illustrate an essential principle. Violence is an inevitable feature of capitalism; to a point that it is even obstructive to the integral to capitalistic expansion and maintenance. Whether one turns to the sabers of 19th-century imperialism or the spreadsheets of neoliberal policymakers, the fact is that violence is constitutive of capital.

Fluctuations over time do not indicate that violence is a side product of capitalism; rather, they reveal that violence is an inherent and necessary condition of its operation. We would also like to state that we are being confronted not only with intensified levels of inequity and threats of catastrophe related to climate change but that we are also being asked to address matters of justice for populations that have long suffered from marginalization. Noting the negative implications of capitalism gives us not only a means of questioning positive interpretations regarding this system being both objective and efficient but also a way of conceptualizing an economic system that does not need to function on either exploitation or oppression.

With regards to the classification of violence under capitalism, these dynamics indicate that violence is inevitable and to an extent it is a form of essential component to capitalism operation. The development and maintenance of capitalist systems are the main source of production of violence, whether through direct coercion or structural inequality. The two preceding systems' disparate structures have further demonstrated that violence is the ultimate component of the capitalist system, which is being implemented as the leading factor toward negative consequences. The development and maintenance of capitalism have a significant connection to violence. What changes is not its presence, but its form and justification. Understanding the rationale behind the approach of this ideology is necessary for confronting inequality, environmental injustice, and imagining economic systems not based on exploitation or oppression.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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