

# Spectre over London: *Mary Poppins*, Privatism and Finance Capital

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## Introduction

In spite of its continuing popularity since its release in 1964, the film *Mary Poppins* has attracted little scholarly interest. Perhaps the absence of interpretative effort directed at the film can be explained by the obviousness of its message of family values that is so typical of Disney productions, so that ideological unmasking is superfluous for an adult audience. Or perhaps we are enthralled by the Disney magic that makes political readings of the apolitical world of *Mary Poppins* and other Disney films seem sacrilegious and theoretical readings seem inappropriate (Bell, Haas and Sells: 2-3). The editors of a volume of essays about Disney films report that their students resisted critical readings and pardoned their enjoyment of Disney films for four reasons: "it's only for children, it's only fantasy, it's only a cartoon, and it's just good business" (Bell, Haas and Sells: 4). This paper risks similar dismissals by challenging the innocence of the Disney magic. Yet it also goes one step further by suggesting that *Mary Poppins'* ideological message of family values and personal fulfilment in the capitalist system is haunted by moments that prevent ideological closure and open up a space for the exercise of critical faculties.

However innocent and apolitical Disney films may appear to be, and however much they may seem to act as ideological reinforcements of capitalist society in general and the American way of life in particular, they cannot help but be haunted. Derrida (1993) has drawn our attention to the critical significance of "hauntology". In his study of Marx, Derrida draws a parallel between the ghost of Hamlet's father and the spectre of communism that haunted Europe in 1848. Such spectres remind us that "the time is out of joint", that there is something wrong with the time we live in that is obscured by the innocence of Disney films. Marx understood that capitalism is out of joint because it contains fundamental contradictions which he explained, among other things, as class conflict. There are also moments of haunting in *Mary Poppins* that indicate the contradictions of capitalism, though not directly in terms of class struggle. Unwittingly, even cultural productions like Disney films that attempt to instruct their audiences in the legitimacy of capitalist society let slip some sign that it is out of joint.

The capitalism that Marx knew is not the same as the capitalism of *Mary Poppins*, and there is not one but two eras of capitalism at work in the film. There is the capitalism of 1964, the year of the film's release, which is a post-World War II capitalism dominated by the United States; and there is the capitalism of 1910, the year in which the film is set, a pre-World War I capitalism dominated by Britain. Different hauntings, different indications of the contradictions of capitalism, are revealed by two different, though not incompatible, readings of *Mary Poppins* that ensue from attention to 1964, or to 1910. The reading that focuses on post-World War II conditions suggests that the "family values" ideology of Disney works more effectively when its message appears to be timeless, as if it does not matter that it is set

in a different time and place. I will argue that the main ideological legitimization of *Mary Poppins* for 1964 refers to what Habermas (1988) calls privatism, meaning fulfilment in the private sphere. As will be shown, *Mary Poppins* instructs its audience to find new roles for themselves in a form of capitalism that is focused more on consumption and leisure time than production, an adjustment that is particularly problematic for men. Yet, complete ideological closure is not attained because the penultimate scene of family reconciliation necessarily excludes Mary, thereby indicating that the conditions of possibility for human fulfilment have not been accounted for. Mary's departure haunts the film.

More significant than that final haunting moment for disruption of ideological closure is the haunting by the film's setting in 1910. In diverting attention away from its contemporary context to make its ideological message of privatism appear apolitical and ahistorical, *Mary Poppins* inadvertently raises questions about the formation of finance capital and imperialism. In the context of 1910, the film invokes a potentially critical parallel between the unreality of the magical, imagined world of Mary Poppins and an account of the world in which capital, rather than human labour, produces goods and delivers services. Furthermore, the absence of Mary in the final scene again prevents a weak attempt at ideological closure. Mary Poppins is a symbol of change that can come with the next wind, haunting London from above like a spectre. The *belle époque* world of 1910 was soon to come to an end, as imperialist competition led Europe into war. If the seemingly robust capitalism of 1910 was about to face crisis and socialist revolution at its margins, is the prosperous post-war world of 1964 not also haunted by the possibility of crisis or radical transformation? There is something out of joint between 1910 and 1964 that the Disney magic does not quite conceal.

## **Family Values - 1964**

The sweetness of *Mary Poppins* helps us to swallow its obvious ideological messages by the spoonful. The "practically perfect" nanny who descends on the Banks family in Cherry Tree Lane, London of 1910 is the answer to the wishes of Jane and Michael, the children of George Banks, a banker, and his suffragette wife, Winifred. Mary Poppins meets the criteria of the children's advertisement text that flies up the chimney. She has "a cheery disposition, rosy cheeks, no warts, plays games, all sorts". Most significantly, she fulfils their desire to "love us as a son and daughter". In contrast, the nanny Mr Banks advertised for in *The Times* "must be a general, the future empire lies within her hands. And so the person that we need to mould the breed is a nanny who can give commands," using as her tools "tradition, discipline and rules". There is a clear contradiction between the military, imperial imperatives of child-rearing according to Mr Banks and the playful, imaginative and irregular approach of the new nanny. The children who have so far driven away six nannies in four months are transformed into eager admirers of Mary's magic. But Mary's presence is temporary. She promises to stay only until the wind changes, but the main change she brings about is not with her charges but her employer, Mr Banks.

The film was made in 1964, and directs absent male-breadwinners to assume new responsibilities in the home by developing caring and playful relations with their children. In a rare critical interpretation of the film that focuses on gender roles, Chris Cuomo (1995: 215) observes that the "focus of Mary Poppins's efforts is to show the father, by example and by trickery, that he is neglectful of his children, overly serious, and too caught up in the meaningless activities of capitalism and preservation of Empire". At the beginning of the film Mr Banks has no time to help Jane and Michael make a kite, but near the end of the film, after having been sacked from his position in the bank, he repairs it for them. His discharge

from the bank, in an humiliating night time ceremony modelled on the unfrocking of a military officer, was brought about by a run on the bank sparked off by Michael refusing to invest and hand over his two pence. Other customers misconstrued the situation and thought that the bank was refusing to give a customer his money back. Michael and Jane were with their father in the bank because Mary manipulated him into taking them, to show them the importance of his work, during an encounter in which Mr Banks intended to sack her for indulging the children in "worthless frivolity". He insists that a "British bank is run with precision; a British home requires nothing less" and that the children need to learn the seriousness of life. Mary mockingly concurs that:

They must learn to feel the thrill of totting up a balanced book...

When gazing at a graph that shows profit's up,

Their little cup of joy should overflow.

After the run on the bank and the invasion of his home by chimney sweeps, Mr Banks blames Mary Poppins for tricking him into taking the children and bringing chaos into his orderly life. Yet when discharged and asked if he has anything to say for himself, he has recourse to the very nonsense word that has infuriated him at home - "supercalifagilisticexpialidocious" - agreeing with Mary's view that it makes one feel better when there is nothing else to say. He also repeats a joke that his children picked up on a visit to Uncle Albert, an acquaintance of Mary's whose laughter literally elevates him and his companions to the ceiling. The senior partner of the bank, Mr Dawes, subsequently dies of laughter when he gets the joke (I know a man with a wooden leg called Smith. Really! What's his other leg called?). The next morning when the Banks family go out to the park to fly the kite, the tail of which is Mrs Banks "Votes for Women" sash, they find the directors of the bank there too. George is offered the vacant position for a partner, so his new paternal role can be reconciled with his work in the heart of capitalism that now has a human face.

As Cuomo remarks, the film appeared at a time when the male bread-winner role was being undermined by the assertion of middle class women's need for fulfilment through careers too, as expressed by Betty Friedan's best-selling *The Feminine Mystique* (1963: 332-33): "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own... [in] a job that she can take seriously as part of a life plan, work in which she can grow as part of society". Significantly, Mary Poppins does not challenge Winifred Banks' involvement in the suffragette movement that requires her absence from the household too. The film pokes fun at Winifred for propounding outspoken feminist views while constantly deferring to her husband at home, though sometimes she seems to be poking fun at him when doing so: "O George, you're always so forceful". In contrast Mary Poppins is self-assured and assertive, in effect interviewing Mr Banks when she comes for the job of nanny. The main message, however, is that it matters little if mother is distracted by a political cause, even one demanding equality with men, provided that father changes his priorities to balance work with family. Once daddy makes a kite, the whole family rallies around. At that point, Mary's job is done. After having parted from the tearful children with the unsentimental statement: "What would happen, may I ask, if I loved all the children I said goodbye to?", she remarks to her talking parrot umbrella stick that it is only proper that the children think more of their father than of her. Cuomo (1995: 213) points out that even though Mary is an autonomous female who resists the role of motherhood and challenges the

authority of the patriarch, her role is not to subvert the social order but to reestablish it, in the form of the family, on lines more appropriate to the times.

Cuomo (1995: 212) also states helpfully that *Mary Poppins* "tells us - the Disney audience - how to rise above ... nasty social concerns and get back to what really matters: family and home". In addition to defining an adjusted familial role for fathers, the film also contributes to the consolidation of what Habermas refers to as "privatism", which is a key feature of advanced capitalism. Privatism refers to "political abstinence combined with an orientation to career, leisure and consumption" as well as "family orientation" (1988: 37, 75). According to these orientations, the stress is on personal fulfilment rather than the fulfilment of consensually agreed social needs through collective activity in the public sphere of politics, represented here by the suffragettes' campaign. George Banks is liberated from his ponderous sense of duty as a subordinate "organisation man" by the laughter that Mary brings into his household. The precision and order he held to be essential to both bank and home is exposed as repressive when Mr Banks becomes a victim of the bank's hierarchy. Magically, it is the bank that learns to lighten up and accept him rather than he who must knuckle down to its discipline. Were he to become as detached and carefree as Bert, the street musician cum pavement artist cum chimney sweep, Mr Banks would demonstrate only one aspect of privatism. But as he is promoted in the bank, during the kite flying scene, the combination of personal fulfilment through career and family is hastily asserted. Moreover, it seems as if Mr Banks will resume work not in order to further the interests of empire, but for his own interests.

The shift from imperial order to familial warmth in *Mary Poppins* was very fitting for Britain in 1964. The imperatives of Empire expounded by Mr Banks and Admiral Boom became archaic at a time when Britain's last colonies were gaining independence, such as Kenya in December 1963. In the cartoon scene, Mary saves an Irish fox from its aristocratic English hunters. Admiral Boom is an old buffoon. Even when he opens fire on the chimney sweeps dancing on the rooftops, having mistaken them for Hottentots, he uses fireworks. There is some ambiguity about the presence of these black(ened) workers, especially in the Banks' home, but significantly Michael and Jane's initial fear when they run into the dark figure of a sweep in a dingy alley dissolves as soon as they recognise him as Bert. The Hottentots have been domesticated, allowed a precarious and marginal place in London, though still stereotyped as singing and dancing minstrels.

In general, the Britain that was divesting itself of its colonies and emerging from post-war austerity was becoming a more relaxed society. Instead of keeping a stiff upper lip and a nose to the grindstone (a most uncomfortable posture), the country could afford to go on a jolly holiday with Mary, at least for a while. Much of the joy that Mary brings to the children comes from her disregard for class boundaries, particularly her association with Bert. As her companion, Bert acts temporarily as an alternative father for the children, one who knows how to offer them fun as well as some safety. When they bump into him after running from the bank, he makes them feel sorry for their father cooped up all day, having nobody to take care of him, persuading them that their father needs their help. Although Bert is too detached from the regularities of working life to be a steady father of a family (or to command Mary's affections), he demonstrates that middle class preconceptions may stand in the way of personal happiness. It is only when Mr Banks is about to lose his class status, figured as the invasion of his house by the chimney sweeps and his dismissal at the bank, that he is open to Bert's deferentially delivered advice that his work is not really so important that he cannot spare more time for his children. Mr Banks had previously given short shrift to the police

constable who suggested something similar when he brought Michael and Jane back home after a previous escapade. Bert both demonstrates how an adult male can relate to children and also mediates between George Banks and his children, complementing Mary's efforts.

The resonance of *Mary Poppins* has diminished little since 1964. As it is set in an earlier time, its messages accrue a timelessness that extols the joys of a child-centred nuclear family for both parents and children. It operates ideologically by focussing attention on the private sphere which is assumed to be resilient to the demands of the system (the market and the state). Yet the very shape of the modern family, the new role designated for fathers, and the restriction of fulfilment and meaning to that sphere are all responses to the imperatives of advanced capitalism. Not even the Disney magic, however, can achieve the full ideological closure that would totally erase all these considerations. There is a very significant absence from the kite flying scene in the park, as Mary floats away over London again. It is Mary who has made the happy family scene possible, yet she cannot be included within it. Her parrot umbrella stick is not fooled by her display of unsentimentality about leaving and her parting look betrays more emotional attachment than she admits. Cuomo (1995: 215, 217) overlooks this sentimental moment and self-sacrifice on Mary's part, as well as the significance of her absence from the scene of family reconciliation. It is the pain of her departure that indicates that something is being concealed or repressed in the final scene of reconciliation in the park, a scene that is surely less memorable than Mary's umbrella-borne departure that closes the film.

What is overlooked is that, in Habermas' words, "the socio-cultural system will not be able, in the long run, to reproduce the privatistic syndrome" (1988: 78). Habermas' analysis of Western capitalist socio-economic systems before the crisis of 1973 focuses less on tendencies towards economic crises, and rather more on what he calls legitimation and motivation crises. The former occur when there is a break down of the legitimation procured through formal democracy in which passive citizens offer diffuse loyalty to a political system that makes decisions on their behalf. Advanced capitalism is prone to such crises because the enhanced role of the state in managing the economy and mediating class conflict means that it needs more legitimation. But full legitimation could come only from substantive, participatory democracy, which "would bring to consciousness the contradiction between administratively socialized production and the continued private appropriation and use of surplus value" (Habermas, 1988: 36). In other words, real democratic control of the economy so that it meets human needs is incompatible with capitalism. Similarly, a motivational crisis indicates that there is a discrepancy between the requirements of the "system", i.e. the administrative state and capitalist market economy on the one hand, and the interpreted needs and expectations of members of society on the other. Like Michael who refuses to accept the lesson of his educational outing to the bank, members of society experience a conflict between fulfilling felt needs and the demands of capital accumulation as well as an expanded state that socialises people, partly through its education systems, to accommodate themselves to market imperatives.

Although for the most part members of Western societies do accept their lot, Habermas points to factors that erode the privatism that sustains the advanced capitalist socio-cultural system. In general, the pressures of administrative rationality and market forces gradually encroach on the very grounds of social integration on which they depend. For example, the family meets real human needs and socialises children, but has been subject to increasing state regulation and turned into a unit of consumption, thereby disrupting the background of human relations. Without a transformation of the class structure of advanced capitalist

societies, even the benefits enjoyed by their members in private are under threat. Mary functions as a *deus ex machina*, to reunite the Banks family, and the very magic of her arrival and actions signals that human fulfilment in the context of advanced capitalism is as fleeting as the changing winds that bring her and take her. The ideological message of privatism has gone down its sugary way, yet there is a lingering aftertaste.

## Finance Capital 1910

Although *Mary Poppins* deflects attention away from its contemporary ideological concerns for the most part, it thereby focuses on the historical context in which it is set. In one of the opening scenes Mr Banks declares in song that:

It's grand to be in Englishman in 1910.

King Edward's on the throne; it's the age of men.

That is also the year in which the Austro-Marxist Rudolf Hilferding (1981) first published in German his major contribution to the updating of Marxist economic theory, called *Finance Capital*. The main themes of Hilferding's book are "the increasing concentration and centralization of capital in large corporations, the formation of cartels and trusts, the role of banks", all of which are related to the distinction between the role of the industrial entrepreneur and the finance capitalist (Bottomore, 1981: 5). Among the key issues examined is the derivability of profit and generation of capital from investment itself, rather than the direct extraction of surplus value from production and exchange of commodities. The centralisation of capital by institutions controlling large funds, notably the banks, contributes to the emergence of monopolies and cartels, that in turn provoke domestic protectionism. In order to compensate for suppressed domestic sales, new export markets are required, that also become arenas for capital investment and cheap labour. The state is involved in this capitalist expansionism as the agency that controls the new economic territories. In other words, capital and state combine in imperialism. There is some debate about whether there is a necessary connection between the finance capital and imperialism, that being Hilferding's position. But there are no sound reasons to disagree with Hobsbawm's (1987: 67) view that "the "new imperialism" was the natural by-product of an international economy based on the rivalry of several competing industrial economies".

The centrality of finance capitalism and imperialism as themes in *Mary Poppins* is quite stark. In 1910, London was the capital of the world's most expansive empire, covering a quarter of the globe's surface. Sterling was the world's leading currency, Britain having 44% of the world's overseas investments in 1914, and its financial, trading and shipping services were crucial to the world economy (Hobsbawm, 1987: 51). Mr Banks works in the Dawes, Tomes, Mosely, Grubbs Fidelity Fiduciary Bank in the City of London. The film is framed by long, smoky and hazy views above London, looking over the Houses of Parliament, the Tower of London, the Thames and the dome of St. Paul's, as if to indicate the mysterious world of high finance. The elder Mr Dawes promises Michael that if he invests in the bank

You'll achieve that sense of stature as your influence expands

To the high financial strata that established credit now commands.

Mr Banks has an alliance with Admiral Boom who keeps Greenwich in time and watches over the rooftops, ever on the lookout for those troublesome natives, the Hottentots. When the Admiral inquires: "How are things in the world of finance?" Mr Banks is able to assure the Admiral that "money is sound, credit rates are moving up, up, up, and the British pound is the admiration of the world". Moreover, his children must be educated to assume the burdens of empire and participate in the alliance of empire and finance: "The children must be moulded, shaped and taught, that life's a looming battle to be faced and fought" - by learning about his work in the bank. England is identified with its banks: "While stand the banks of England, England stands", declares the elder Mr Dawes, a "giant" of finance who can barely stand on his feet.

One significant consequence of the shift from industrial to finance capitalism is that the labour that is exploited to generate profit becomes less visible, both because it appears to be generated by the activity of investment itself and because more of it is done far away in the colonies. Britain would have had a significant trade deficit at the time were it not for "its massive invisible income from both its international business services (banking, insurance, etc.) and the income which came to the world's largest creditor from its enormous foreign investments" (Hobsbawm, 1987: 52). The illusion develops that no actual work need be done for desired outcomes to be achieved. Mary Poppins need only reach into her carpet bag to produce, magically, a hat stand, large mirror, rubber plant and lamp. Goods seem to appear from nowhere. She simply snaps her fingers and the children's room tidies itself up, as if domestic labour is done of its own accord. Indeed, the work of the household servants does seem largely invisible to Mr and Mrs Banks. Part of Mary's magic, then, is parallel to the illusion of finance capital, though she advises the children "never to judge things by their appearance, even carpet bags", as if giving an early lesson in ideology critique. The work of colonial labourers is represented in the film obliquely by the chimney sweeps, who are themselves invisible in that their faces are covered with soot, but also because they work up the chimneys or from the rooftops. For the most part, however, goods are produced and services provided in the film by invisible labour.

When the children visit Mr Banks in his bank, Michael receives an instructive lesson from the elder Mr Dawes and his father about how he can make a profit without any effort, turning his two pence into a pound.

If you invest your two pence wisely in the bank, safe and sound,

Soon that two pence safely invested in the bank will become a pound.

And you'll achieve that sense of conquest as your affluence expands.

If invested, his two pence will take on a life of their own, connecting him with distant lands and investment projects: "You'll be part of railways through Africa, dams across the Nile, ... majestic self-advertising canals, plantations of ripening tea". Mr Banks' suggestion seems no less fantastic than the journey in a cartoon world that Mary, Bert, Jane and Michael take by leaping into one of Bert's pavement drawings. Just as money, which according to Marx is the paradigmatic commodity, takes on a life of its own in the bank and is invested seemingly with enormous agency, so do commodities in Mary's holiday world come to life. Her umbrella and Bert's walking stick echo their owners' dance, merry-go-round horses leap off into the fields, and penguin waiters serve Mary and Bert with a complementary meal. The imaginary world to which Mary introduces the children is as unreal as the one described by

the bank directors. Neither representation of a world includes an account of the social relations that would make each world possible, because each ascribes agency to non-human entities instead of to human labour.

Mr Banks' dismissals of the children's stories and adventures as nonsense thus reflects negatively on his capitalist activity. More pointedly, before their trip to the bank Mary warns the children that some people through no fault of their own cannot see what is most important. She refers both to the old woman selling pigeon feed at two pence a bag that she reveals in the snow-storm model of St Paul's, as well as to Mr Banks' inattention to his children. Each of these symbolises recognition of real needs overlooked by the logic of capital accumulation. Giving two pence for the old woman shows that one cares, says the song, but as Mr Banks does not care, he refuses to allow Michael to give her his coin. But Michael is more interested in the use value of his copper, in the satisfaction it can bring, than in participating in the accumulation of capital by investing in the bank. Seeing their father disconsolate after the run on the bank, the children give him the two pence to show they care for him. In turn, after he has understood the error of his ways and that Mary Poppins is right, he ignores the rules of exchange economy by making a gift of that two pence to the directors. Overnight, he repairs the kite, proclaiming the next morning: "With two pence of paper and strings, you can have your own set of wings".

In diverting attention away from its contemporary context to make its ideological message of privatism appear apolitical and ahistorical, *Mary Poppins* inadvertently raises questions about the formation of finance capital and imperialism. The film does not dissolve a fundamental tension between the tangible demands of people in relation to each other and the fantastic demands of capital accumulation. The family scene in the park is only possible because capital, in the form of the bank directors, has come out on holiday, as if in celebration of the replacement of one old director with a younger one. But even the utopia of a hastily assembled non-capitalist park is marred by Mary's absence. Mary is not only the catalyst of Mr Banks' revaluation of his children and family life. She is also the catalyst, through Michael and the old lady, of the run on the bank, or the crisis of capital accumulation.

As above, the scene in the park is possible only because of Mary's absence, but if attention is focussed on finance capital rather than on family and private fulfilment then her absence also indicates the absence of an agent of change to bring about the permanent demise of capitalism. The next day, Mr Banks will go back to work in his new post, a new nanny will be employed, and Mrs Banks might return to her campaign. The jolly holiday with Mary reveals for a while the potential of a world in which human relations and needs matter more than the accumulation of capital, but to return to business as usual the film must expel its own heart. Despite all the efforts of a Disney production to reinforce the values of father-led family, at the close of the film our affection remains with Mary as she floats away, taking with her the hope of a more meaningful change. In that moment as she sails above the City of London, the heart of empire and capitalism, her silhouette haunts it like a spectre.

In any retrospective view the London of 1910 is haunted by the changing winds of history, four years before the First World War and seven before the Bolshevik Revolution. However secure the Banks family may have felt, perhaps the east wind that Bert and Admiral Boom sensed that boded a storm also foretells of the transience of "the society and civilization created by and for the western liberal bourgeoisie" (Hobsbawm, 1987: 11). Hilferding did not regard war as the inevitable outcome of imperial competition, but it was easy in retrospect for Lenin to make that claim in his 1916 pamphlet, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of*



*Capitalism*, for which he drew extensively on Hilferding's work. Hobsbawm (1987: 54) also concludes, with the benefit of greater hindsight, that the combination of national economic and political competition contributed to the genesis of the First World War. That war did not destroy finance capitalism, but it paved the way for the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of an alternative economic system. Moreover, the Leninist critique of imperialism remained influential in the national liberation movements, those rebellious Hottentots, that contributed so much to decolonisation. London of 1910 is haunted by its own demise that will come, like Mary, with a change of the wind.

## **Conclusion: 1964 and the Spectre of 1910**

Derrida (1993) wrote his reflections on the spirit of Marx that still haunts us at a time of seeming ideological closure, the end of history and the triumph of capitalism over Soviet socialism. It is the haunting of that spirit which prevents ideological closure. In this paper I have argued that *Mary Poppins* would like to reassure us that so long as we attend to our families and private lives, all is and will continue to be well with the world. Yet, ideological closure is forestalled because there is something out of joint both in 1964 and 1910, that disjunction consisting of contradictions of capitalism that are understood by Habermas as crisis tendencies of advanced capitalism and by Hilferding and Lenin as the tendency of imperialism to war. The historical setting of *Mary Poppins* haunts Disney's happy family of 1964, raising the possibility that something is out of joint in the society it inhabits. There is also no easy joint between the world of 1910 and that of 1964, so the attempt to obscure the ideological message of privatisation can be unravelled into a critical perspective that, as Derrida reminds us, continues to haunt today's capitalism too.

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