

**Night of Free Crimes: a Critical Study in View of James DeMonaco's Movie,
*The Purge***

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Abstract

What would one do if laws of society are broken annually for twelve straight hours by the same institutions that created them? What would one do if all the crimes including murder are legal for twelve hours? Such a backdrop creates the cityscape of America in James DeMonaco's movie *The Purge*. In *The Purge* we witness a brewing future depicting an America where unemployment rate is at one percent and crimes are at all time low, thanks to the mass catharsis' called-the purge; a government sanctioned twelve hour bloodbath to help the society get rid of its bottled aggression. However, under the façade of its being a country-wide catharsis providing a vent for the suppressed hatred it actually turns out to be a means of artificial population control. Social control and class conflict are embedded within the very notion of purgation propagated by the government in the movie. Following Marxist view of class and class struggle it can be said that the class which owns the means of production and has economic powers, takes over political power as well. They hold the state power, in this case that is the "New Founding Fathers" and this paper explores the execution of that power in this city of crimes and how that power is exercised by means of hegemony and ideology to naturalize the bloody sacrifice in the name of mass catharsis, where people belonging to lower classes are worst affected.

Key Words: Mass Catharsis, Class Struggle, Social Conflict, Hegemony, Ideology, American Dream

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The year is 2022. The modern cityscape had already been ravaged by the continual rise of unemployment rates coupled with overcrowded prisons. It had already been through times when crime was just another ordinary event of the day and most of the jobless population could be found behind bars. However, the new government of the United States; “New Founding Fathers of America” has finally solved its growing problem with violence and crime by making it legal. More precisely by providing a twelve hour window to the citizens and encouraging them to vent their animalistic rage by partaking in the annual event of mass catharsis while all emergency and law enforcement services remain shut down for that time period. The very notion of purging has made a long way from the cleansing of one’s soul to the cleansing or rather purging the society of poorer classes. And the movie paints a rather dystopian cityscape set in not so distant future, functioning on the pivot of free crimes at a particular night of the year. Such a modus operandi of this future city can be viewed in context of the long term societal ramifications of imperial and capitalist machinations. The movie circles around the wealthy Sandin family who tries to survive the night. James Sandin (Ethan Hawke) is a top salesman at a security systems firm, who lives with his wife Mary (Lena Headey), daughter Zoey (Adelaide Kane) and gifted son Charlie (Max Burkholder) in a wealthy gated community, whose picture perfect streets are spared from the annual night of savagery. However things go horribly wrong when sympathetic Charlie allows a wounded man (Edwin Hodge) to take refuge in the Sandin’s home, thereby attracting a posse of murderous upper-crust socialites, who demand the Sandins to return the group’s lost quarry or face brutal consequences. Under the apparent garb of a run-of-the-mill home invasion movie or a slasher horror flick, this film actually offers an intriguing social commentary, as it brings to the fore issues like- social control and class conflict.

Before we go on exploring the cause and effect of this phenomenon, the very title of the movie calls for an in depth analysis. In this context one must refer to Aristotle’s concept of catharsis. Critics have argued throughout the ages as to whether catharsis is a metaphor from religion or from medicine. F.L. Lucas asserts that purification and cleansing are not proper translations of catharsis. According to him it should rather be rendered as purgation. Lucas

firmly states, “It is the human soul that is purged of its excessive passions” (“Catharsis.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia). This question of purgation is explored in the movie as it depicts a few hours of legalized bloody sacrifice in exchange for a near perfect society for the rest of the year. While depravity and deaths are increasing each year, each purge is more successful in keeping crime down. This countrywide mass catharsis operates under the Hobbesian³ notion that humans are inherently self-interested beings who will never be satisfied with the power they have without acquiring more power and who will continually seek power and seek to eradicate competition in support of their own self-preservation. DeMonaco’s movie shows how this concept of purgation, propagated by the “New Founding Fathers” operates at a social level implying the purging of the society of its lower classes. The purge as suggested by the government works to help people to get rid of their suppressed aggression and hostile behaviour. And the implementation of this rule results in crime and unemployment rates plummeting to all time low. However, beneath this supposed stability and the making of a near perfect society a larger force of class conflict is at work here. Because the poor areas are worst affected during this purge and people who cannot protect themselves or afford high-tech security systems for their protection in order to go through the night of purge often end up being the victims of this mass catharsis. And at this point, from a window providing a vent for pent up violence and hostility it actually serves as a means of artificial population control. This argument is highlighted when the group chasing the innocent man, identifies themselves as belonging to a class of social elites and justifies their attempt to kill that man by simply stating that the man belongs to a lower section of society or rather is a ‘grotesque menace to their just society’. Hence the killing of such a ‘dirty homeless pig’ is justified. The urban space with all its pent up frustration and hatred bares its ugly face since till then all it was trying to do and all it ever did was disown all the social agitations regarding overpopulation and class struggle and all the unpleasant questions they posed, by simply sweeping them under the rug and putting a label of singularity on them. And now when a legal window for crime is provided, the masks of humanity are ripped off and the demons within walk free.

DeMonaco’s city brings to the fore the existing power relations in the society and the reinforcing of the same. The domination and reinforcement of power relations is termed hegemony, a term popularized by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Such strengthening of power relations are exercised through the mechanics of ideology by the new government as they justify the bloody violence of the purge night. Pramod K. Nayar explains in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, “Hegemony is the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Hegemony, like Ideology, works less through coercion than through consent” (130). It is evident as the “New Founding Fathers of America” propagates the purge as a kind of necessary evil; they even go to the extent of labeling it as a holiday. The new government asks its citizens to show their support for the purge by displaying blue baptisia flowers at their doorsteps. “Marx claimed that ideas and ideology are no independent, as Idealism would have, but rather a product which is dependent on material matters, namely social and economic structures. According to Marx,

ideas, perceptions and consciousness are always the result of specific historic material circumstances” (“Ideology according to Marx – definition and explanation”). Hegemony includes ideology, and works most effectively when the dominated accept their domination. Ideology is therefore an instrument of power because it helps prop up the dominant classes by naturalizing an exploitative relationship and convincing the working classes that this is how things are. At the very beginning of the movie a television monitor displays a renowned professor of a certain distinguished institution justifying the need and effectiveness of the purge in the society. It’s simple and effective advertising- get some random expert to be the mouthpiece of a deep rooted propaganda and give a scientific bend to it and people will have no qualms to place their faith on the product they are trying to sell; subtle yet potent. Ideology is the writings, speeches, beliefs and opinions-cultural practices that assert the naturalness of present social condition. And such instances are abundant in the film. As ideology is dependent upon language and signs because it has to present reality in particular ways by obscuring other harsher aspects of this reality. It is through the circulation of such signs and languages that the “New Founding Fathers” justify the violence of purge night, suggesting to the working classes that the present social condition is natural, benevolent and ultimately beneficial to them. The protagonist James Sandin is completely into the purge propaganda. He sells security systems to the rich so that they can protect themselves during the purge and he in turn gets rich by selling the products. The mechanisms of ideology are at work even at the level of family. It is evident when James’ young son Charlie questions the need for such gory violence, James simply answers, “You don’t remember how bad it was, Charlie. The poverty, all the crime. This night saved our country” (*The Purge*). This clearly exemplifies Althusser’s notion of Ideological State Apparatus. Louis Althusser posits: “Ideological State Apparatuses belong to the private domain - to churches, schools, families, and so on. Instead of repressing, and inflicting order, through repression, Ideological State Apparatuses reinforce the rule of the dominant class primarily through ideology” (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia). Such naturalizing of the social condition, naturalizing the bloodbath involving artificial population control in the name of mass catharsis is unmistakable in the lines appearing on the television monitors just before the beginning of annual purge: “Blessed be our new founding fathers and America, a nation reborn. May God be with you all” (*The Purge*). Pramod K. Nayar quotes Terry Eagleton while defining Ideology. Eagleton summarizes the operations of ideology that serves hegemonic purposes. According to him ideology works through six different strategies: “1. By promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; 2. Naturalizing these beliefs to render them self-evident; 3. Universalizing these beliefs; 4. Devaluing ideas that might challenge it; 5. Rejecting alternative or rival forms of thought; 6. Obscuring social reality” (132). And this is exactly how the ideology of purge is generated by the “New Founding Fathers”. They promote the belief regarding the need for an annual purge and make that belief universal. Here the directorial team has done a commendable job by creating a website⁴ for the “New Founding Fathers” to give it a realistic feel. That might be a good marketing strategy but the very website gives us a clearer picture. It is through this official website that the “New Founding Fathers” advocates the necessity and effectiveness of purge. Here it can also be linked with urban capitalism as it presents images of progress, efficiency and prosperity concealing the inequalities

of society and the modus operandi of such a purging that involves killing of innocent poor people. The website promotes and circulates the ideology naturalizing the act of purge. The new leaders firmly assert that they strive to “establish Justice”, “insure domestic Tranquility” and “promote the general Welfare.” Thus the common citizens are convinced that the need for the bloody violence of purge night is only for their benevolence and welfare. One can also see posters flashing on the “NFFA” website, telling the tale of growth and affluence. One of them depicts a smiling old lady and read something like this- “When my grandkids ask me what it was like when I was their age, they can hardly believe it. Rampant crime all year round, so much poverty everywhere. I tell them a world without purge is a scary place. A place I hope they never have to visit. That’s why I support NFA”. Even surveillance, that is originally meant to monitor crimes and antisocial activities and forms an integral part of the modern cityscape, have been turned into broadcasting equipments so that the wealthy ones can sit pretty in their fortress and enjoy live feed of the events; it’s just like tuning in to watch the weekend kick-off. How well the whole concept is propagated is evident as people are even shown exchanging greetings and throwing parties to commemorate the event. As if it’s Christmas. This is precisely how the whole notion of purge is universalized and naturalized.

American Dream asserts “that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy” (Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide* 57). DeMonaco’s film takes this to new heights as the natural urge to move ahead and to get better than other people is embedded within the notion of purge. *The Purge* visualizes an American dream built upon the sacrifice of an expendable underclass. During the twelve hours of the annual Purge, anyone can be killed with absolute freedom and everyone has a license to kill. However the legislature is immune and the moneyed ones can afford to lock down in their well-protected homes or to treat the hunt as mere sport, leaving the economically marginalized as the easiest prey. The cornerstone of American dream is rugged individualism and Marxist thinkers discuss such ‘rugged individualism’⁵ (Tyson 60) studying it apart from the romantic notions generally attached to it. According to Marxist thinkers it is an oppressive ideology as it puts self-interest above the needs of other people and even above the survival of others. Karl Marx viewed the conception of the American dream as a fruit of ‘bourgeois ideology’,⁴ one that gives false hope to the working-class of a society. The “New Founding Fathers” does exactly that. They give the economically marginalized people a false hope. A hope telling them that they too can move forward and achieve big. The “NFF” propagates the notion of purge in such a way as if it provides a window of opportunity to the economically marginalized classes to get better. However, the catch is pretty obvious and crystal clear. Whereas, the so called affluent can afford a “lock-down” thanks to high tech security systems and stay safe in their well protected homes, the poor people can not. As a result of the licensed bloodbath and gory violence that occurs during the purge night, the poor areas are worst affected. And the justification provided by the ruling class for such mass killing is quite simple. People are poor because they are lazy and they are killed because they could not make most of the opportunity. Moreover, the society gets purged of its lower classes and poverty. So, the ruling class sees it or rather presents it as a win-win situation for everyone. Consumerism is

another linchpin of the American dream. As it states that one particular individual is as good as what he/she buys, in case of *The Purge* one is as good as how much or how costly security system one can afford. James Sandin gets extremely rich by selling costly security products to people of higher classes. This is something that the lower class people can not afford or can not even think of. And this very inability leaves them vulnerable to the onslaught of purge night. To be more specific it can be said that consumerism is one of the layers or one of the themes dealt with and used in the film. And *The Purge* with tremendous dexterity sketches the notion of consumerism that has taken root in the American culture. The idea is very clearly conveyed that if you are not consuming then you are not a real citizen. Hence as a citizen of a particular metropolis it is one's duty to be an active consumer. One is supposed to shop till he/she drops for that matter. And if one opts to do otherwise, the society will make sure that he/she gets dropped. The movie inspires such discussions about exploitation and consumerism in the buzzing cityscape. As the unfolding of events under the regime of the "New Founding Fathers" highlight the market mentality as true identity.

The Purge brings to the fore issues like class struggle and social control. Underneath its apparent guise of a horror film set in a speculative scenario this movie provides a brilliant social critique. Class conflict is a major theme as the movie is propelled by the rich vs. poor tension. Lois Tyson provides a clear insight to the Marxist notion of class struggle, "From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn between the "haves" and the "have-nots"..." (54). The movie depicts the fact that it is actually the interest of the "haves" that is being played out in the very process of purge. If we consider the bigger picture it is the "have-nots" who are being sacrificed in the name of mass catharsis. The purge is a well designed scheme set into work by the "New Founding Fathers" as a means of artificial population control. During each purge the elites utilize this government sanctioned blood-soaked carnage to get rid of the economically marginalized ones. Since the affluent ones consider the "have-nots" as useless burden to the society. It so happens in the course of events that the antagonistic group of masked people partaking in the purge end up at the doorsteps of Sandin household, where their supposed quarry was granted shelter by a sympathetic Charlie, James' young son. However, instead of immediately breaking through the walls of the house, the leader (Rhys Wakefield) of the group offers a sort of negotiation or rather a clarification to James. And it is at this juncture and through his comments that the standpoint of the so called moneyed ones, concerning the purge, comes to the light. The leader unmask himself without any hesitation, rather in more of a boasting manner and assures James that they mean no harm to the Sandins as they are one of their own, it is only the poor man they want. The battle lines are clearly drawn here. He not only stops at that but goes on to identify himself and other members of his group as some highly educated young people and belonging to a class of social elites. And he even goes to the extent of justifying their act lest the Sandins hesitate to turn the poor man out. The voice of the ruling class speaks out through the leader as he says that the poor man is nothing but a "dirty homeless pig" and "a grotesque menace" to their just society, who must be executed at all costs. And interestingly enough the fault of that man, apart from

being poor of course, was that he stood up and managed to kill one of the masked attackers in self-defense in their earlier attempt to execute him. “A grotesque menace to our just society who had the audacity to fight back” (*The Purge*) are the very words used to describe the poor man and to justify the urgency to kill him, so that the society can be cleansed of one more useless pig. The idea conveyed here is pretty simple as the group of masked attackers argues that it is their socioeconomic status which entitles them to purge and kill off the homeless. And not surprisingly enough, when the violence intensifies James exclaims more than once that this sort of thing is not supposed to happen in an affluent and gated community like theirs. Now what is interesting is that he not for once says that this sort of violence should not be happening anywhere in the first place but rather suggesting that it should happen to someone else and somewhere else; i.e. the poor and homeless ones and that is only natural. As far as social control is concerned Marxism pays great attention to how class domination is particularly at the base of social control. The workings of such social control establish or rather enforce certain norms and rules standardizing the present social condition. Similarly in this case the ruling class holds the state power and along with it comes social control. In a society where the conflict is distinct between the ruling class and the working class as is depicted in the movie, there is a certain urgency in those who “have” to prevent those people who “have-not” from sharing their rewards and ripping too much of life’s benefits. Hence ideology is needed to justify the inequality. Anything that threatens the ruling class, anything that challenges them must be suppressed and silenced at all cost. This idea can even be stretched to the point that it was the “audacity” of the victim to fight back against his attackers that made them desperate. And their frenzied search for the victim so that he could pay for standing up against them, further heightens the argument. Marx asserted that the proletariat would one day spontaneously develop a class consciousness needed to stand up against their oppressors and they would form a classless society. But ironically enough DeMonaco’s movie boasts a perversion of this idea as it is the ruling class that takes up guns and ammunition in order to kill the marginalized ones of the society. “It is like witnessing an elite protest where conflicting interests are pitted against each other. Even in a state of normlessness, we see that anarchy remains at the mercy of the elites” (Allanegui).

DeMonaco’s movie is built on a thought provoking premise. It explores the ethical and political responsibilities of the state and at the same time highlights the power relation between the “haves” and the “have nots”, in view of the present state of metro cities with all its diverse group of people and creeds. We have media outlets in the movie arguing over the necessity of purge. However those actually questioning such annual mass killing and voting against it are very few and not surprisingly enough, their voices remain unheard. The presentation is made in such a way that people are drawn towards the very idea of creating a picture perfect society. As discussed earlier, the new rulers; the “New Founding Fathers of America” takes up the help of ideology in order to naturalize and universalize such violent onslaught as the purge. In order to sell their product they trick people with an illusion of a near perfect society; a society where unemployment rates are hitting rock bottom and crimes are at all time low. Now this projection of a picture perfect society is nothing but a mere deception. For underneath its apparent glitters and neatly mowed lawns and scenic driveways lies a truth, far more grotesque, bitter and harsh.

In their supposed or rather propagated striving for a crimeless community the new rulers have sanctioned an orgy of murder and mayhem. And this bloodbath where people from lower classes of society are worst affected and left bloodied, is what that drives this false utopia. Marx and Engels visualized a formation of utopian society where people could live like equals, where there would not be class conflicts. But in *The Purge* a very twisted version of the forming of such a perfect society is presented. As we hear in the movie a reporter saying that the killings during purge happen primarily in poorer communities and minority neighborhoods where people can't afford expensive security systems like the ones James sell and as a result left bloodied and mutilated. So basically, in the name of creating utopian society, what we really witness is carnage and dystopia. The nights of the purge killings turn out to be a dystopia for the homeless and marginalized ones unlike of course the wealthy ones, who remain protected in their well gated communities and throw parties to watch the countrywide mass killing in their wide television screens as if a grand sport event is being broadcasted.

In an interview on the possibility of purge happening in real life, a well known sociologist Lester Andrist says, "There is kind of a *Purge*-esque theme going on from the standpoint that the rich are able to actually kind of commit crimes with relative immunity. So, from that standpoint there are some parallels with this idea of a Purge. What's interesting about the movie is that it extends this idea to all of society for one night". Now although it appears that the whole society is given a fair chance to partake in the purge, the end result is known to all and needs no further clarification. The so called proof that this system is actually effective is included at the end of the film where in the form of news, we gather that while the depravity and the death count are increasing each year, each purge is also more successful in keeping crime down for the rest of the year. So it provides a perfect wrapping for the package that government is trying to sell in the name of purgation. Shockingly enough, there's been an online debate regarding the need for purge in society and 65% of people participating in that debate voted for 'no', while 35% of them voted for 'yes'. There are other references of the purge regarding real issues. In this context, one can cite "Social media posts by Baltimore High School students on April 27, 2015, during the 2015 Baltimore Riots"⁷ ("The Purge." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia), which referenced the film. It is needless to say that the gravity of an event like purge must not be considered on basis of singular events. The bigger picture tells us a horrible story. The idea operating behind the whole concept of purge is that it provides a way out for suppressed anger and hatred for one single night. As a result, crime rates are likely to fall for the rest of the year, for even if one would want to commit a murder, he/she can wait for the purge night to come to get away from the hands of law and live the rest of the year like a normal law abiding citizen. However, it is the ideology that works in the execution of such annual purge, is something that's more important and it is where issues like class conflict between the ruling class and the working class comes forth. The annual event of mass catharsis thus turns out to be a grotesque mechanism of the ruling class ideology performing an artificial population control.

The Purge leaves its audience with lots of questions to ponder on. One such question would be how the social relations are affected after each purge. Nevertheless the movie is a bold endeavour in its attempt to address the issue of class conflict inherent in society. From a Marxist

viewpoint, it can be said that the annual purge makes way for a social set-up in which wealth and power rest in the hands of the ruling class. The whole set up is made in such a way that there is very little room to stand up and challenge the authority. But what is perhaps more compelling is that how hegemony and ideology comes into play in the struggle between the ruling class and the marginalized ones in the society. How ordinary citizens are led to believe that the present set up of annual mass extermination, particularly that of the poor and homeless ones, in the name of mass catharsis, is actually for their benefit and there's absolutely nothing wrong with it, is something that has been well presented throughout the movie. It is indeed chilling when one comes to consider that in this night of free crimes, how the whole thing is perfectly chalked out and set up, destined to one inevitably horrible end. Again it is in this context that one must go back to the very end of the movie as we hear a newsreader making his report just after the conclusion of annual purge. And he reports that the "New Founding Fathers" have launched a statement labeling it as the most successful purge till date; a conclusion made after considering the increased body count all over the country. And we come to know from another report that people are even gathering in Times Square in the following morning for a public vigil to thank the victims "for their sacrifice" in order to make the country a happier and safer place for them. This is how such gruesome act of violence and bloodshed is naturalized by the power of ideology. According to Marx, conflict is present in all societies, it can be there out in the open or it can be there and operate lying underneath the course of everyday life. But there is no denial that it's there. The Purge explores this idea of conflict intrinsic within the propagated concept of purgation. And unlike the Marxist belief that one day the proletariat would develop a class consciousness to fight its oppressors, it shows in a twisted and dark way how the ruling class is the one taking arms to eliminate the marginalized ones, as if to unburden the society of its economically subordinated members. It gives rise to a chilling idea that if someone is not co-operating and not from our group, let's just get rid of him.

The question remains that whether this is actually a remedy for a crimeless world or not, whether it is a price worth paying or not. But there is absolutely no doubt that the price is paid by mostly and I would not be too wrong to say, only by the lower classes of people. They are the ones who become the punching bag providing a so called vent for the society's pent up anger and get slaughtered in the bloody game of mass catharsis. And this whole mechanism of power struggle and the implementation of the annual purge by the ruling class for preserving self-interests, is well dealt with and documented in the movie.

Notes

1. In this paper I follow the definition of catharsis as the purification and purgation of emotions.
2. As depicted in the movie *The Purge*, New Founding Fathers of America took over and

reinstated themselves as the new government. They often go by NFFA or sometimes NFA (New Founders of America) or NFF.

3. Hobbesian refers to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and his notion refers to his belief that human beings are self-interested beings driven for power, see “Hobbes’ View of Human Nature and His Vision of Government”.

4. The directorial team has created the website <<http://www.newfoundersamerica.org/>> to make it more realistic. And the site is dedicated to uphold the motto of the NFA.

5. Rugged Individualism refers to the idea that each individual should be able to help themselves out, see Wikipedia.

6. Bourgeois ideology refers to the ideology of a social class oriented to economic materialism and hedonism and upholding the extreme political and economic interests of the capitalist ruling class, see Wikipedia.

7. Baltimore riots refer to the protests that followed Freddie Gray’s hospitalization and subsequent death in police custody, see Wikipedia.

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