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Contextualising the Conflicts of American Economic Beliefs in Kurt Vonnegut's *Jailbird*

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Abstract
This paper aims to explore how, in *Jailbird* (1979), Kurt Vonnegut relentlessly challenges economic misconceptions in America that stem from ideas of egalitarianism, meritocracy, and equal opportunity. Additionally, it assesses how he creatively links the origins of economic disparity to American history rather than viewing it as a brand-new problem. In *Jailbird*, Walter F. Starbucks' life is examined, with particular attention paid to how, two days after his release, this alleged participant in the Watergate conspiracy rises to become the vice president of RAMJAC, the biggest corporation in the world. The novel is a satirical critique of American society's impersonality, corruption, and loneliness. The two main emblems of the political and economic ills are Watergate and RAMJAC. With the support of his surrogate parents, Sacco and Vanzetti, as well as the three strong female mentors - his wife Ruth, Sarah Wyatt, and Mary Looney - Starbuck, who was a passive and innocuous accomplice in Nixon's Watergate scandal, shambles his way through a few tests towards a sort of moral heroism in defeat. Vonnegut portrays crony capitalism and money as dehumanising factors in American culture.

Keywords: Economics, Politics, Society, Capitalism, Inequality, Corruption

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the most influential twentieth century American authors. In his works, he expresses his great concern over the destruction of the earth, mankind, and human individuality. With a stupendous and remarkable style of writing and simple felicity of diction, he is the casual 'humane' being who stands beside the reader showing the realms and reality of the Universe. In his works, he makes some contradictory claims, such as that the best truth is a reassuring falsehood, that people should learn to prefer happy illusions to evil ones, and that the greatest way to interpret human history is as a joke. Instead of being overcome by the world's shortcomings and tragedies, he attempts to taunt, convince, and entice the readers to laugh at them as well. His humorous observations on organised religion, business, politics, war, machine technology, and organisations in general reveal the inhumanities and vices of a society he is always critical of. However, his humour, kindness, and gentleness, as well as his comic energy infused with personal optimism, ironically counterbalance his satire and cosmic pessimism.

Vonnegut's *Jailbird* is a powerful account of how capitalism and class conflict shaped the American economic system. The prologue of the novel presents Vonnegut as a fundamentally dissident American writer and ultimately frames the novel as a critique of the accumulation of wealth in a small number of hands. He begins by discussing the Great Depression's era of crushing poverty and the ensuing rise in poverty-crime rates. Additionally, he clearly sympathises with the outlaw hero John Dillinger, who was shot down by the FBI after presumably turning to bank robbing after suffering the worst of the Great Depression.

The historical conflicts of the labour movements, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and the dishonest and greedy Nixon administration are also examined in the prologue and throughout the novel. Historical, autobiographical, and self-reflexive narratives are all mixed in the prologue. One may argue that Powers Hapgood represents the urgent necessity for labour unions to be established to protect workers from widespread exploitation, which in turn resulted from the American political system's inability to provide economic justice. Vonnegut says he was impressed by Hapgood's resilience in the face of hardships he faced because of his egalitarian beliefs.

Hapgood was a Harvard graduate and the son of a powerful family. Singer contends that he maintained the integrity of ideas and dedicated his life to the labourers' rights and the freedom of the so-called "radicals" whom he considered to be his allies, even though doing so would inevitably lead to personal difficulties. The author allusively restates that the American top class does not regard decency and courtesy towards the underclass by bringing up Hapgood's trial.

It is believed that a straightforward, conventional Christian life based on justice, inclusivity, and humanitarianism is unnecessary or, at most, just partially appropriate. *Jailbird*'s portrayal of Powers Hapgood, a real historical figure, supports the author's claim that the story is historically accurate. Leading strikers on numerous times, such as when Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, and supporting miners' fights resulted in Hapgood's incarceration and placement in a mental hospital. Furthermore, the novel exposes the sombre history of the American labour movement through an odd fusion of history and metafiction. It might be argued that the novel crosses the boundaries of historical discourse while retaining its fictional scope. According to Jerome Klinkowitz, "*Jailbird* and *Slapstick* contain a lot of tinkering, both historical and futuristic" (*Contemporary Writers: Kurt Vonnegut,* 72). He skilfully introduces the reader to the quasi-historical aspect of the worker's problems while highlighting the self-reflexive nature of the novel.

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The Cuyahoga Company workers' fictitious walkout and the subsequent Cuyahoga slaughter are dated by the narrator to October 1894. There are unquestionable similarities between the Cuyahoga massacre and the Pullman Strike of 1894, which resulted from a worker salary cut imposed by the Pullman Car Company to make up for the company's decreased earnings after the financial panic of 1893. Thirty people were killed in the violence that followed President Cleveland and the federal forces' intervention to put an end to the uprising. Vonnegut depicts this ruthless implementation of the injunction, the ensuing mayhem, and the deaths that followed in the novel. A classic example of a capitalist is Daniel McCone, the owner of Cuyahoga Bridge and Iron Company, who, when faced with financial difficulties, cuts workers' wages; in response, the workforce go on strike.

McCone does not try to appease the employees. Instead, he replaces them with low-paid workers who are willing to accept jobs at almost any wage because of the economic downturn. Furthermore, the narrator adds that there were businesses that frequently pretended to be labour unions with the sole purpose of hiring men to break strikes for meagre pay. As a result, neither the strikers nor the legal labour unions can stop such repressions and protect equality and solidarity. Therefore, McCone quickly and easily replaces the irate employees and guarantees that their future is always bleak. When the fired workers gather near McCone's plant to demand their rights, they are ignored even though they are later willing to return on any terms of settlement. As a result, many of them are massacred. As a result, the author presents a highly negative image of how wealth and influence are abused to weaken or incapacitate blue-collar workers and their organisations. Maybe the charge made by the Methodist clergyman in the area. The accusations made by the author in the novel are best described by Jennings against President Cleveland and the state officials during the Pullman strike.

Vonnegut makes the case that any opposition from the workers was suppressed since it was seen as an un-American oddity. Since July 4th was proclaimed a federal holiday and the national Labour Day in 1894, Vonnegut appropriately places the strike's beginnings in that year. The story refutes the idea that the announcement was made to appease the call for Labour Day. Instead, it appears to support the claim that the proclamation was a political ploy, a priority for the upcoming election, rather than an attempt to address the indifference shown to the working class while the government colluded with the corporate elites to oppress the workforce.

Walter F. Starbuck, the main character, is the son of a driver who served on Daniel McCone's estate. As a member of the underprivileged group, Walter is lucky to receive a Harvard education from Alexander, the son of Daniel McCone, who takes him under his wing. Walter states right on that he is a Harvard University alumnus and that he enrolled in the U.S. His participation in the Nixon White House, which led to his imprisonment for his "preposterous contributions to the American political scandal collectively known as the Watergate," (44) and the federal government. He skilfully offers a comprehensive perspective on the relationship between people and power and how power operates to the exclusion of the working class through his historical adventures and mishaps, such as his appointment in the Federal Government under Franklin Roosevelt, his induction into the Nixon administration, his subsequent detention, and his eventual appointment as vice president of a megacorporation, which was followed by another term in prison.

Walter claims to have had communist tendencies in the past, which, in his original analysis, were unlikely to have been a disadvantage because, at the time, being a communist was completely acceptable. But his vision of a classless society turns out to be a fantasy as anti-communist sentiments wane after the first Red Scare. Additionally, by foolishly and carelessly accusing Leland Clewes of being a communist sympathiser in his evidence, he destroys the career of a consul with promising prospects in the State department and, in turn, is fired from the federal service.

Vonnegut does a good job of describing the frenzy that the immigrants are a menace to civilisation because they are propagandists for communism. "Seemingly more concerned with punishing radical activism than with determining the true guilt or innocence of the convicted men," (209) the U.S. government sentenced two Italian immigrants, Sacco and Vanzetti, to death by electrocution after they were deemed political extremists in 1920. This case is the central focus of *Jailbird*. Referring to them as the "most spectacular, most acrimoniously argued miscarriages of justice in American history," (111) the narrator makes the case that the administration actively pursued them and that they were the targets of the red scare and class verdict.

The disrespect and mistreatment of the migrants upon their arrival is portrayed as the catalyst for Vanzetti's dislike of American officials, companies, and organisations. While Vanzetti led a strike against a factory and was later placed on a Department of Justice blacklist, Sacco was also targeted by government spies and placed on a blacklist for his involvement with the protesters who opposed the employers' hostile actions and protected the working class from harsh deprivations like unsafe working conditions and wage cuts. Additionally, they planned to convene a conference to demand an investigation into the death of Andrea Salsedo, a so-called "anarchist printer," who was arrested by federal investigators on unidentified charges. Sacco and Vanzetti were wrongfully accused of two unsolved killings, even though they were first charged with having the leaflets that called the gathering.

The regime was able to demonise them through the contentious case, which ultimately led to their death. Vanzetti was also accused of theft, which was a false accusation. Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with harming "existing institutions," which were essentially capitalist. According to Philip R. Yannella's *American Literature in Context after 1929*, the novel basically reflects the belief that communists were "naïve dupes or more likely, haters of freedom" and that labour unions were "inspired by Communism" (28) during the 1920s and 1930s, when there was a perceived threat of anarchist revolution, also known as the first Red Scare. Because communism was thought to encourage labour militancy, it was believed that suppressing labour unions was fundamentally the same as suppressing communism.

By bringing up this historical event, the author also criticises the American judiciary and makes the case that even the so-called "wise men's" knowledge was unquestionably biassed and corrupted. Importantly, the narrator reinforces the claim that America has failed its most vulnerable inhabitants by failing to provide a safe and comfortable workplace by fusing historical and fictional storytelling. The radium poisoning episode that led to almost fifty terrible fatalities in 1925 is mentioned in passing in the novel. Each of the fifty ladies suffered from rotting skulls and bones, which ultimately led to their agonising deaths. On the other hand, the incident highlights the United States' incompetence and egregious indifference to the poor. According to the Department of Labour, there is an unbreakable link between the health and death index and economic disparities.

Mary Looney, the mother of a fictional character in the novel, suffers from this kind of criminal neglect. She works at the Wyatt Clock Company and gets radium poisoning. Because of their previous affiliation, which eventually drives the plot forward, this episode radicalises Mary Looney, who also hires Walter towards the novel's end. Jack Graham, Mary Looney's ex-husband, founded RAMJAC Corporation, which eventually expands into a massive conglomerate. Mary takes over as RAMJAC's largest shareholder following his passing.

Throughout the twentieth century, the American economy saw a radical transformation as the old manufacturing giants were virtually supplanted as the main drivers of the economy by conglomerates that operated across multiple industries and had a genuinely global reach. The RAMJAC Corporation is a quintessential American conglomerate because it operates across a wide range of industries and buys numerous businesses, including publishing houses, hotels, cafes, and educational institutions. Interestingly, in addition to displacing several companies and absorbing numerous establishments, the conglomerate also influences and encourages the "toppling of governments in countries that were small and weak" (216).

The author adamantly contends that American megacorporations have become a political and social power at work both locally and internationally, in addition to being an economic force that controls important areas of the domestic economy. Even though the RAMJAC Corporation controls a disproportionate amount of the American economy, Mary Looney also gives her deputies instructions to "acquire, acquire, acquire," which they successfully do and generate ever-increasing profit margins for the company (226). Mary Looney, who is portrayed as a rare exception, has no intention of pursuing fortune or power for her own benefit.

Despite being a multimillionaire, Mary Looney does not fully support the traditional corporate mindset. She is resentful of the early-life trauma she experiences because of her mother's passing and her father's vision impairment. She vehemently denounces and denounces the monopolisation of wealth, the free enterprise system, and the harsh working conditions of the labourers. She also secretly drafts a will to that effect, intending to transfer the corporation, its assets, and its profits to the "rightful owners, the American people" (218) via the federal government. Ironically, she is struck by a RAMJAC cab and dies a very cruel death, but she can convince Walter that she has framed her will and that it ought to be made public. Although he remains employed by the corporation for two years until the crime is discovered, Walter chooses to act differently towards the end of the novel and unlawfully conceals the will, which results in his third imprisonment. This is because he is aware of and a target of the powerful forces at work.

The author vehemently ridicules the American economy's driving factors in the epilogue, leaving little room for any kind of fair distribution. After that, even RAMJAC falls victim to the American capitalist system and is overtaken by the enormous waves of acquisitions and profit-making. "What was left, it was said by the politicians, would help to pay the interest on the people's national debt, and would buy them … advanced weaponry that they so richly deserve," (234) the narrator adds casually but sarcastically, as if it were a footnote to the list of expenditures made by corporations to procure RAMJAC. Because there seems to be no help and any assistance that is provided is manipulated to benefit the upper class, the suffering of the working class and the general populace is thus depicted as an ongoing phenomenon.

It is important to note that the narrator's penetrating lenses do not spare the relationship between politics and corruption or the relationship between American foreign policy, which was mostly dependent on war, and the corresponding economic issues. Walter consents to conceal the unlawful campaign contribution, which totals around one million dollars, while he works in the Nixon White House. He claims that this became essential since the FBI was going to investigate all the White House's safes. Schlesinger's "imperial presidency," which was characterised by political deceit and fraud, is bitterly remembered by the Watergate crisis and the atrocities that followed. The author also revisits history and highlights past injustices through Walter's reflections. Emphasising the need to exercise caution over "media exhaustion of news," Fredric Jameson has maintained that

Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy, are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past. The informational function of the media would thus be to help us forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia. (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* 60)

By employing historiographic metafiction and challenging the relationship between media and data, Vonnegut directly challenges this "historical amnesia," or more specifically, selective historical amnesia that seeks to erase or minimise specific historical wrongs. In addition, after the Great Depression, America was portrayed as a country that successfully won every war theatre by combining its industrial power and entrepreneurial spirit to create the greatest military machine in history.

The author refutes this idea by claiming that despite the widespread political discourse, which was more akin to war propaganda, being used to convince the public differently, a disaster appeared imminent to the youthful generation and the general public. The reader gains an understanding of the sense of poverty and unease that the children experienced during the Great Depression, World War II, and the years in between due to the narrator. While Vonnegut skilfully emphasises in both novels that "unfettered capitalist expansion" has infiltrated "the nature and the unconscious" to the point where "there no longer appears any outside," he also contends that "economic booms distributed their fruits unequally"(Vincent B. Leitch's *American Literary Criticism since the 1930s*, 249) over decades, a claim supported by historians such as McCartin about twentieth-century America.

Vonnegut sharply critiques this social issue and unequivocally highlights that despite the American economy's numerous significant transformations, a sizable portion of the population has consistently been economically marginalised. Their development has consistently followed an uneven or impeded path. The narrator of *Jailbird* refers to Skid Row, a notorious neighbourhood in Los Angeles where America's homeless people live on pavements and "keep the cold out by drinking wine" (43). The vagrancy epidemic and America's destitute population are symbolised by Skid Row, which also shows that an impending economic disaster is not unthinkable in our country. Considered by many to be a Third-World neighbourhood in the middle of a First-World city, Skid Row perfectly captures the realities of America. It succinctly and persuasively summarises the author's contention that America is a society split, with the wealthy and the poor at opposite ends of the spectrum and little means of communication between them.

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