



## **A NEW DEAL FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF FDR'S FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS**

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The Great Depression was a time when despair and hopelessness dominated the outlook of the American people. What began with the Stock Market crash in 1929 lasted for ten long years with nearly half of the U.S. banks failing and unemployment rates skyrocketing to nearly 30%. The election of 1932 proved to be a time of change, namely a shift from a Republican president, Herbert Hoover, to a Democratic one, Franklin D. Roosevelt. When Roosevelt delivered his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933, the citizens were more than willing to listen and obey his plans and ideas for revitalizing the American economy and ending the dark days of the Depression. The power in Roosevelt's hands, therefore, was enormous. He used this power to encourage the people to traverse a path towards capitalism by providing them with answers that benefited the marketplace and the working class and removed power from the hands of the elite bankers. He called for change, and the American people listened with an optimistic hope that had not been seen for several years.

By critically analyzing Roosevelt's first inaugural address, this paper explores the relationship between culture, society and ideology and explains how these relationships can ultimately lead to a

better understanding of how political figures can control the way we see our society and ourselves. Rhetorical analysis of the work will shed light on the subject of political rhetoric and its influence on changing an existing system so that it benefits the public at large rather than the few individuals who want to sustain the system for their own greed. Because of its implications for changing the economy and criticizing the rich, Roosevelt's speech is best discussed using the Marxist theory of discourse analysis.

### **Historical Context**

However, before analyzing the text of Roosevelt's speech using the Marxist theory of discourse, it is necessary to comment on the history that produced the speech and to explain why Roosevelt chose to address particular concerns in his discourse to the nation. The Great Depression was, of course, the most influencing factor in Roosevelt's speech and led to his advocating many reforms associated with the economy. The Great Depression not only caused hardships in America but in other countries as well. Foreign countries depended on American products and services that were not being produced and these countries also fell into economic hardships as well. Something had to be done to restore America so that ultimately other countries could build up their economies too. Also, during the Depression, many people found themselves without jobs as businesses began laying off more and more workers. As a result of the stock market crash, coupled with this high rate of unemployment, many families lost their life-savings and could not find work to rebuild their savings. They then found themselves going from living a middle-class lifestyle to being thrust into poverty. This change in many Americans' ways of living led to a lack of trust in Hoover and his form of *laissez-faire* economics during a time when strong leadership was needed. Americans began to look elsewhere for answers. Looking for a better way of life meant

a decrease in support for the Republican Party, as the nation searched for a leader whose policies would rebuild the American economy. When Roosevelt was elected in 1932, he provided the citizenry with a much-needed change. His first speech as president clearly exhibits his advocacy for change and reform.

Roosevelt's first inaugural address sought first and foremost to ease the American people's fears concerning the economic recession. He wanted to rally the support of the public as well as present himself as a man not afraid to confront the Depression head-on. He was also trying to gain more support for the Democratic Party, who would be most likely to support his New Deal proposition.

In his speech, Roosevelt attacks the banks and banking systems of America and blames them for many of the causes of the economic hardships of the time. One of its central arguments is to find a way "to put people to work" (Roosevelt 2). He is mostly concerned with lowering the percentage of unemployed Americans and getting the business and industrial centers up and running again. He argues for strict supervision of banking and credit investments and a provision for adequate currency distribution. In fact, after he delivered his address, he declared a bank holiday and closed all the remaining banks while calling a special session of Congress. The speech also discusses raising the value of agricultural products and helping out farmers by reducing the costs of running and maintaining a farm. Mostly though, his inaugural address seeks to reform the current capitalistic ideals to include more benefits to the workers and to create a support base for himself.

Roosevelt's speech was received favorably by the majority of the American public who were desperate to receive some form of optimistic encouragement. Roosevelt's "we have nothing to fear but fear itself" line has often been repeated in American politics because of its ability to function as an optimistic statement during a time when everyone is fearful of what might happen. However,

Roosevelt was not without his critics, many of whom claimed that he knew little about economics and foreign policy. Because this speech was delivered at such a desperate time, though, many people got caught up in the sheer optimism of it and believed that he was a savior who was going to help the country out of the Depression.

By applying the Marxist theory of discourse to Roosevelt's first inaugural address, one can easily identify the ideologies that are at work as well as reestablish the history that produced the text and how it has affected what the speaker is saying or revealing. This theory provides the best possible analysis to understand the economic and social implications of the ideologies that permeate the speech as well as to show how the rhetoric used aims to reform the status quo and advocate a new capitalist economic system of American society. Specifically, in his first public address to the nation, Roosevelt is trying to establish a new form of capitalism to benefit the working classes as well as rebuke the elite for causing exploitive capitalism in the United States. Roosevelt felt that this form of capitalism was one of the main contributing factors to the economic downfall of the United States during the 1930s and 1940s.

### **Summary of Speech**

Roosevelt begins his speech emphasizing the need for honesty and truth in this time of national unrest. He promises that the nation will survive and continue to grow. He makes the point that the difficulties that Americans face are only material in nature, and although these difficulties appear to be impossible to resolve, the country still has a lot to be thankful for. He suggests there is an abundance of goods that, with the help of human efforts, can be produced and distributed to help revitalize the country. It is at this point in his speech that he begins his attack on the "money chang-

ers” who have economically destroyed the country and have fled from their responsibilities. He then asserts that Americans must restore the society by “apply[ing] social values more noble than mere monetary profit” (par. 6). By downplaying the role of wealth in society, Roosevelt is promoting an economic reform that dispels the belief that money is God.

He then goes on to outline the actions that will be taken to remedy the most important task facing the nation - putting people to work. These actions include:

- Raising the value of agricultural products
- Preventing the foreclosure of farms
- Creating relief activities and national planning and supervision for transportation and communications
- Maintaining a strict supervision of banking, credits and investments
- Ending of speculation of other people’s money
- Establishing sound currency

Roosevelt goes on to discuss some international trade relations, although he asserts that this field of policy is second to “the establishment of a sound national economy” (par. 14). In terms of international relations, he states that America will follow the policy of “the good neighbor,” meaning that the country will respect other nations and any agreements that are created with other countries.

Roosevelt spends the rest of his speech convincing the American people that his course of action will work and that he will be able to maintain and create a better existence for everyone. He firmly remarks that he will work with Congress to implement his plans and will not go beyond his constitutional authority. He does, however, ask Congress for broad executive power to combat the national emergency. He ends his speech by reassuring the American people that they have done nothing wrong and that democracy has not failed. He will guide them through this long

process and, in the end, the nation will emerge stronger and more capable.

## **Theory**

The Marxist theory of discourse takes its name from the philosophical and economic ideas of German theorist Karl Marx. The key tenets of Marxism are as follows:

- 1) The growth and self-realization of human beings ultimately depends upon their work and the relationships that they build around the production that goes into that work.
- 2) In a capitalist economy, manufactured products are intended to generate profits rather than to fulfill human needs.
- 3) In a capitalist society, the products that result from human labor are seen as being independent from those who have created them. They are objectified, and this leads to the products controlling the nature of human labor.
- 4) Because the society is controlled by production, many ideologies regarding human labor are created. Although these ideologies and beliefs are false, people living in a capitalist society see them true because they have been imbedded in their belief structure for so long. The only way to accomplish social change is to dispel these false ideologies, which will cause the people of the society to restructure their belief system into one where production is not the most important aspect of life.

(Foss et al. 217-218)

Marxists are united by the “belief that material conditions interact with and influence the symbols by which groups make sense of their world” (Foss 292). They are also critical of ideologies that seem to be independent of any conditions but in reality are dependent on the material conditions of the society in which they are produced (Marx 538). For Marxists, “ideological forms are more than ideas, beliefs and values; they have a material existence and are

embodied in cultural institutions such as . . . political parties and in artifacts such as . . . speeches” (Foss 292-293).

The Marxist theory of discourse, which draws on this economic and political theory, forms a part of the ideological critic’s scope and is “a way of analyzing cultural products in terms of the social and economic practices and institutions that produce them” (Foss 292). No piece of discourse is independent of the society that created it. Most Marxist readings and critiques focus on the exploitation of a group of people who suffer as a result of a specific ideology. Many of the criticisms attack the ruling classes who “use rhetoric to justify their exalted positions, rationalize the meager existences of the downtrodden, and inhibit insurrection” (Hart 325). Marxist critics attempt to make a difference in the world of politics by showing readers that manipulations exist in the work and that these manipulations are working to suppress them.

## **Analysis**

The first main goal of a Marxist critique is to find the dominant ideology of the work (Hart 327). The dominant ideology that is present in Roosevelt’s speech is that of reforming the economic base that had come in to existence in America before and during the Depression while renouncing the elite bankers who contributed to this exploitative capitalism. Roosevelt wants the American people to believe that he can lead them back to the way life was and states that “this nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper” (par. 1). However, in order to redefine and maintain this capitalistic society, people must be employed to produce the goods required for consumers and trade. Therefore, Roosevelt advocates returning people to work and even states that the greatest task that he is faced with is to “put people to work” (par. 10). He goes so far as to say that “[happiness] lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort” that comes from working for a

living and that these “dark days will be worth all they cost” in the end (par.7). He is attempting to equate working with rebuilding the economy and creating a new system that will benefit the middle and lower American classes. He invokes the image of the hard-working pioneer, reminding listeners of how these people contributed to making America what it is today, a country of enormous freedom and individuality (par. 15). By sending the unemployed people back to work, Roosevelt suggests that he is continuing the tradition of hard work that these pioneers began hundreds of years ago when they shaped this country.

Roosevelt wants his audience to feel that by returning to work, they have a chance to escape the poverty that they are currently living in. Ultimately, Roosevelt is invoking the image of the American dream, an ideology developed by which it is believed that a person coming to or living in America can prosper economically through hard work. He wants the listeners to believe that they too can achieve the American dream by working, and he encourages them by saying that, “the joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten” (par. 7). He will try his hardest to put them to work. Through their employment, they will accomplish “greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our natural resources” and help to jump-start the economy (par. 10). Through the jobs they are given, they will also help to reestablish the capitalist economic base that has previously existed in America. He speaks of the “manifestation of the American spirit,” which is essentially that the freedom that exists in America should lead to economic prosperity, not just for the wealthy but for the lower and middle classes as well (par. 15). He assures the people that this spirit of unity, determination, and pride “is the way to recovery...[and] the strongest assurance that this recovery will endure” (par. 15).

The economic factors that influence this capitalist ideology are enormous. Roosevelt knew that in order for goods to be produced,

there must be people to produce them, so he uses his power as the new leader of an already depressed nation to relay his optimistic ideas concerning how putting people to work will help the economy. The unemployed people to whom he is speaking have been surviving with little money for some time and are first and foremost looking for a way to generate income to feed their families. Roosevelt notes their distress saying, “a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence” (par. 3). He is sympathizing with his audience and is offering them a solution to escape poverty as well as a means to establish an economy that will support and benefit them. However, in order for Roosevelt to implement a new form of capitalism, he must stress that the current system of capitalism is a failure to the average American and that it seeks only to benefit the extremely wealthy.

In his speech, Roosevelt criticizes the current economic system and exposes the problems that he has observed that cause this form of capitalism to be detrimental to the working class of America. Capitalism during the Depression consisted of business owners taking advantage of the current desperate situations of many people who were laid off by offering them poor paying jobs. Obviously, the unemployed, who could barely afford to feed their families, would be willing to work at any job, no matter how dangerous or how low the pay. Roosevelt saw how detrimental this form of capitalism was to society and how unfair it was for the worker, who had lost “the savings of many years” (par. 2). Therefore he resolved to change the system and return it to what it was originally intended for - to benefit the working class by keeping power out of the hands of a few individuals. He does not go so far as to advocate communism, but he does advocate a form of capitalism where human lives and well-being take precedence over material things. The opposite of this ideology of people over goods is a central criticism of Marxism (Foss et al 218).

Roosevelt notes that Americans face many difficulties, but “they concern, thank God, only material things” (par. 2). He is trying to downplay the role that material items have had on the country by focusing instead on the values and morals which have “shrunk to fantastic levels” since the onslaught of the Depression (par. 2). These values must be restored “with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values, “with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by old and young alike” (par. 24). He does not want the people to focus on attaining mere material wealth, a view that has corrupted many businessmen and wealthy bankers in the past. He tells the public that the “measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit,” and that the public should concentrate more on preserving the American spirit than making money (par.6).

One of Roosevelt’s main concerns that he seeks to address in his speech is to comfort those who are living in poverty and frightened about the future, which in turn is a central goal of a Marxist critique (Hart 328). In the speech, Roosevelt uses his position as leader to gain the trust of his listeners and to reassure them about the future. He notes that “in every dark hour of our national life, a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days” (par. 1). He is establishing ethos by speaking “the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly” and he uses phrases like, “I assume unhesitatingly the leadership”; “I will return the courage and devotion”; and “I shall not evade the clear course of duty” (pars. 1, 18, 23, 22). By insisting that he is going to help the people during this terrible time, he is gaining their trust and establishing his own credibility as a strong leader, something that the public has expressed they want.

Another technique that Roosevelt uses in the speech to help

comfort the American people is to offer solutions that will help the working class and put some power back into their hands. He proposes solutions such as “engaging on a national scale in a redistribution . . . to provide a better use of the land for those best fitted for the land. [This] task can be helped by definite efforts to raise the values of agricultural products [which will] prevent realistically the tragedy of foreclosure of our small homes and our farms” (par. 11). He also calms the audience’s fears by proposing to “[unify] our relief activities which today are often scattered, uneconomical, and unequal” (par. 11). Roosevelt is using his status as leader to initiate proposals that will enable him to obtain “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency” if Congress should fail to adopt his proposals and there is still a national emergency (par. 22). He is reassuring the public that he will not give up and will not allow the working class Americans to be trampled on by the government or anyone else. He describes himself as the “present instrument of [the people’s] wishes” and will, if necessary, ask for power that is “as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.” He is declaring war against the Depression and is laying out the “lines of attack” in this speech (par. 13). He assumes the position of the fearless leader by assuring the people that “the only thing [they] have to fear is fear itself” and therefore, they should not be afraid (par. 1). He reaches back into the history of America and notes that “compared with the perils which our forefathers conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for” (par.4). “Plenty is at our doorstep,” says Roosevelt and it is now the goal of the American people to harvest what is there instead of allowing the rich to control the supply (par. 4).

Roosevelt does not only use his first inaugural address to offer solutions and comfort the American people. He also employs rhetoric to blame and criticize the wealthy businessmen and bankers

who have contributed to the poor economic state of the nation during the Depression, thus invoking one of the three main goals of a Marxist critique (Hart 328). Roosevelt notes that these elite have helped to decrease demand so that an overabundance of goods is lying wasted while many people remain unemployed. He explains that this failure of exchange is caused mainly through “their own stubbornness and their own incompetence” (par. 4). Terming them “money changers,” Roosevelt focuses his main attack on super-wealthy bankers like the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts. These people, “faced by failure of credit . . . have proposed only the lending of more money. Stripped of the lure of profit by which to induce our people to follow their false leadership, they have resorted to exhortations, pleading tearfully for restored confidence” (par. 5). Roosevelt wants to expose the manipulations of this elite group and force them to take some responsibility for what they have contributed too. He says that they have behaved like cowards and have “fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization” (par. 5). They have made only meager attempts at finding solutions for the economy’s problems.

As a result of their abandoning the American public during their time of need, these bankers have caused a lack of confidence in the people, for, as Roosevelt explains, confidence “thrives only on honesty, on honor, on the sacredness of obligations, on faithful protection, on unselfish performance,” values that these rich elite do not possess (par. 8). Unlike Roosevelt, who wants to help the people and redefine capitalism so that it also benefits the common person, these bankers “know only the rules of a generation of self seekers” and only care about sustaining their rich and privileged lifestyle by maintaining the economic status quo (par. 5).

By accusing the wealthy of being slaves to money, Roosevelt is establishing his belief that money should not be the standard of success in our society. He implies that there are many lower and

middle class people who work much harder than these bankers, but do not reap the benefits of their hard work. In the following passage, Roosevelt strikingly presents his view that money is not the most important possession in society. By realizing this, we can get past this false ideology and prevent future corruption and depressions. Roosevelt states:

Recognition of the falsity of material wealth as the standard of success goes hand hand with the abandonment of the false belief that public office and high political position are to be valued only by the standards of pride of place and personal profit; and there must be an end to a conduct in banking and in business which too often has given to a sacred trust the likeness of callous and selfish wrongdoing. (par. 8)

Roosevelt wants the American people to stop viewing money as the ultimate goal in life, like most of the rich bankers and businessmen have. By abandoning this view and the “mad chase of evanescent profits,” there will be no need for citizens to engage in corruption and those who are in power will be less likely to try to go behind the backs of the public and engage in practices that inhibit the working class (par. 7).

However, Roosevelt does not just use his speech as a forum to criticize and blame the ultra-rich; he offers proposed solutions for amending the problems of the banking industry so that a depression will hopefully not occur again. Roosevelt’s two solutions for amending these problems are “a strict supervision of all banking and credits and investments [and] . . . an end to speculation with other people’s money” (par. 12). By ending the ultimate power of a few individuals to control the banking and currency in America, Roosevelt is putting power back into the hands of the people. They no longer have to wonder where their money is and what it is being used for. The people will not be “ministered unto but [will be able to] minister to ourselves and to our fellow men” (par. 7). They will

not have to depend on the wealthy bankers and will gain a greater independence and freedom, which is what America stands for. A capitalist society will then emerge that is truer to the actual meaning of true capitalism - an economic system in which groups of individuals, rather than only a few, control the wealth of a nation and its industries.

## **Conclusions**

Did FDR accomplish all that he intended in his first inaugural address to the American people? When he was inaugurated, the country was in desperate need of a fearless leader who would fight for the rights of the working class and do something to stop the form of capitalism that had overtaken America. Although he himself was very wealthy, Roosevelt saw the need for representation of the working class and sought to redefine capitalism to reflect the concerns of the average American. In his speech, he makes visible the dominant ideology of capitalism and shows how putting people back to work will help to establish a better economy. By understanding the events that produced this speech, it is easy to see why these changes were needed.

By analyzing Roosevelt's address, one can easily see how this speech affected the way in which the American people saw themselves and how the relationship between culture and ideology is ultimately influenced by political figures. Roosevelt gains the people's trust through his speech and reaffirms his position as the person who can deliver them from the current pessimistic state of the nation. He convinces the people that there must be a change in economic policy in order to emerge from the Depression. By assuring the American people that the Depression is not their fault, he forces them to locate the problem (the moneychangers) and realize that they do not have to continue living in a society that places so much value on money. Ultimately, he changes the entire culture of the

United States when he implements his new economic base, and his introduction of a new ideology significantly impacts the changes that occur subsequently.

The ideology that caused the Depression (placing too much emphasis on money) is discussed negatively several times throughout his speech to illustrate to his audience that there are better ideologies that do not involve a worship of money, but rather involve an enjoyment of producing goods and the sense of achievement that comes with hard work. He knows that the people will see his way as superior because he has already told them that he knows best, he is their fearless leader. The power of political rhetoric is reinforced in this speech through his connection with the thoughts and worries of his audience and through the hope that he offers to those in need. Roosevelt used his first inaugural address to offer the newly poverty-stricken American people an optimistic voice in a time of crisis and a glimpse into a future that would promote a new form capitalism to aid them all in attaining the American dream.

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