

How a Boy Called Christmas Converted Me to the Politics of Greed

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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This was the Christmas my young daughter finally cornered me into admitting that Father Christmas doesn't exist. I felt a small pang of regret that she had taken another step towards graduating into the less colourful world of adulthood, but also a larger sense of relief that I could now stop lying to her. What a few years ago seemed like harmless collusion in a fable to sprinkle a little extra magic on Christmas had over the years become a burdensome deception that seemed a violation of the trust between a parent and child.

Worse, as my daughter had grown older, the content of the lie had become more obviously poisonous – and not only because a childhood spent venerating Father Christmas likely serves as one of the pillars of the continuing patriarchy.

The degree to which to the Christmas story reinforces our understanding of how society should be organised – and at a time before we can think critically – was driven home to me by a new Netflix and Sky joint film production I watched with my family on Christmas Day.

A Boy Called Christmas is the origin story for Father Christmas, explaining how a peasant boy called Nicholas living in a gloomy winter kingdom eventually brought joy to young children around the globe.

By fleshing out a magical realist backstory for Father Christmas, the movie brings into unusually sharp focus how the ideas at the heart of Christmas condition young minds to think in damaging ways about how power should operate in our societies. We have a mysterious authoritarian figure who wills only the best for us. He shapes our world in ways that are not, and should not be, open to scrutiny. His authority must be accepted and trusted. Good behaviour – in the sense of obedience and compliance – is rewarded. And those rewards, conflated with love, are measured in strictly material terms. Consumption is not only good, it *is* love.

Politics of deception

But *A Boy Called Christmas* goes one step further than this. It also celebrates to a quite alarming degree – at least, if you are not too seduced by its humour and enchanting story line to notice – the ideological corruption not only of Father Christmas’ world but of ours too. It glorifies the politics of deception, of class war, of a naked, brutal capitalism that has successfully subverted the struggle for justice and equality. And in achieving all this through the wonder of Christmas, it underscores how powerful this type of propaganda is, even for adults.

One early, critical scene actually unmask the film’s ugly politics and its telling relevance to our own times, even if it does so inadvertently.

The kindly king calls together some of his bravest peasants, including Nicholas and his father, for a meeting at his castle. He observes that life in the kingdom has become cheerless and drab, and asks – in what amounts to a dangerous political miscalculation – what they believe they need for a better life. He gives his destitute subjects a voice for the very first time.

Stunned by the idea that they can express an opinion, the peasants hesitate. Then the revolutionary potential of the moment dawns on them. One calls out “A living wage!” Another cries “Healthcare!”. Yet another demands “Union representation!”.

In the film, this pivotal moment is played for laughs, with the king hurriedly deflecting his subjects from the revolutionary socialism he has accidentally unleashed. But the king’s desperate response momentarily breaks the fourth wall. Even if only for a moment, it is difficult not to see the parallels with our own, supposedly democratic systems. The king shuts down the dialogue he has initiated, dismissing the peasants’ demands. Then with all the weighty gravitas of a Barack Obama in his presidential heyday, the king tells them what they really need: “Hope!”

Hope. Formless, contentless, cost-free hope. The king rams “hope” into their mouths to silence them like a parent sticks a pacifier into a baby’s mouth to stop it crying for attention. His “hope” depoliticises the moment. Like the Holy Grail, “hope” keeps us on a permanent quest – one never realised – for fulfilment, for justice, for a better world. It is the horizon we never reach. Hope is what every leader in a corrupt system offers his subjects instead of rights or equality.

So the king sends the bravest peasants on a mission to find “hope”. He has no idea where “hope” can be found or what it might look like. But find it they must, even if they die trying.

Exploited workers

In response, Nicholas defies his father and goes on a dangerous journey to locate a fabled elf city renowned for the joyful inhabitants who supposedly live there. If “hope” can be found anywhere, Nicholas concludes, it is in Elfhelm. But when Nicholas stumbles on the elf city, he discovers a dark, miserable place. Recent abusive encounters with humans have made the elves fearful of outsiders. They have elected an authoritarian leader to protect them from the human enemy.

To cut a long story short, Nicholas turns things around by saving an elf child. The elves not only accept him as one of their own but take him in as their leader. Nicholas helps the elves rediscover their joy and encourages them to return to making the toys that keep them

entertained.

And everyone lives happily ever after. Or so the film suggests. The elves agree to become Nicholas' exploited workers, producing toys through the year for Father Christmas to export to the rest of the world. Nicholas returns with a large bag of toys to show the king that he has indeed found "hope". In a critical marketing exercise, Nicholas takes the kindly king on his flying reindeer to see whether the children of the kingdom's peasants are lifted a little out of their misery by the magic of a Christmas present. Once the king is reassured that a spinning top or cuddly toy will be effective at preventing his peasants from rising up to demand a living wage and healthcare, he awards Nicholas an annual contract to distribute toys to the kingdom every Christmas Day.

Dangerous propaganda

What's most alarming about *A Boy Called Christmas* is the extent to which it reminds us of how in thrall we are to capitalism - even when we understand how brutal a system it truly is. I found myself celebrating this tale of greed and exploitation, of consumption and class war, even as, at a cerebral level, its message appalled me. *A Boy Called Christmas* bypassed my critical faculties to appeal to my heart - I cheered on the enslavement of the elves, I warmed to the bumbling, despotic king and I approved of the beatification of Nicholas, capitalism's first and iconic entrepreneur.

A Boy Called Christmas had wrapped up "hope" as a glitzy small present for me just as deceitfully as the king had packaged "hope" for his own subjects.

In other words, the film worked supremely as propaganda, even as I recognised how dangerous that propaganda was. It managed to place another brick in the wall that has been imprisoning my mind for decades.

If it achieved this much with me - as someone opposed to the politics it lauds, as someone who prizes critical thinking, as someone unable to avert my gaze from its subtext - what, I wondered, had it done to my young daughter watching alongside me. She still inhabits the fuzzy realm between childhood's magical thinking and the superficial rationality of adulthood. The wall around her mind is only half-built, but she will soon be a happy prisoner - as readily, it seems, as I am one.

A Boy Called Christmas left me even more certain I should never have colluded in the deception called Father Christmas. But it also emphasised to me how difficult it is to avoid capitalism's sophisticated propaganda machine. Its corrupting influence touches almost everything we consider entertainment - even a simple, heartwarming children's fable.

Bah humbug to you all!

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This essay first appeared on [Jonathan Cook's blog](#).

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include

“Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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