

Högskolan Dalarna  
Literature Degree Thesis (EN 3017)  
Supervisor: Mats Tegmark

**Marxist Comrades or Capitalist Pigs?**  
From Musical Proletarians to Musical Capitalists in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*

Spring 2008  
Emma Nilsson-Tysklind

**Contents**

**Introduction ..... 2**

**The Foundation of The Commitments ..... 4**

**The Music of The Commitments..... 12**

**The Animal Farm of The Commitments..... 18**

**Conclusion..... 23**

**Works Cited ..... 26**

## Introduction

*Soul is the politics o' the people.*

**R. Doyle**

Critical articles on Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* have previously mostly focused on the characters' use of the English language and the way their language creates their Irish working-class identity. Not many critics have put the novel in the light of the band's Marxist rhetoric and the importance of that to their constitution of identity. Nonetheless, there is much to be said about it in this context. The band, The Commitments, use a clear Marxist rhetoric as their foundation, claiming their own state of oppression, and consequently the people's state of oppression. This can be seen firstly in their identification with "niggers," claiming that "Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland" and that "the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin" (9), and secondly in their definition of themselves as "the people," stating, on a poster, that they are "Bringing People's Music To The People" (82). Thus, their Marxist expressions play a very important role in the creation of their image as a working-class band, a band of the people.

However, there is a certain level of hypocrisy in the band's way of using Marxist rhetoric in their quest for fame and fortune. Their covert goal is arguably not equality and justice, but instead personal success. Thus, as Mary McGlynn suggests, "their manipulation of their own image reveal[s] them to be cannily employing the capitalist strategies that have left them disenfranchised" (McGlynn 234).

Recent Marxist critics seem to have abandoned the idea of Marxism as a functional societal structure. Fiske asserts that "[t]his sort of idealism seems inappropriate to the late twentieth century, which appears to have demonstrated not the inevitable self-destruction of capitalism but its unpredicted (by Marx) ability to reproduce itself and incorporate into itself the forces of resistance and opposition" (Fiske 1269). The same tendency can be seen in *The*

*Commitments*, where the revolting proletariat does not strive for a Marxist society at all, but for higher positions for themselves in the hierarchy of capitalism. Here, one finds parallels between *The Commitments* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The *Commitments* make use of a Marxist approach in order to legitimise their position just as the pigs of *Animal Farm* do for the same reason, and the goal in neither case is truly Marxist.

This essay will thus argue that the story of *The Commitments* can be seen as symbolic of the way communism has worked in societies that have tried it, throughout history. The subtext of the novel will be illustrated, first of all, through describing the hypocrisy of the formation of the band and their image, i.e. their use of Marxist rhetoric as a capitalist strategy. Second of all, and related to the first, the music that the band plays (and the music that they do not, for political reasons, play) will be put into the context of the battle between socialism, in the novel represented by soul music, and capitalism, represented by jazz. Finally, the essay will examine the whole journey of the band – its formation, its successful period and finally its downfall – in comparison to Orwell's *Animal Farm*. It will be argued that a comparative reading highlighting the similarities between the journey of the band, on the one hand, and the revolution, short success and downfall of the communist society of the farm animals, on the other, emphasises the allegorical value of *The Commitments* when it comes to underlining communism's seeming inability to function as a societal structure.

For this analysis, Marxist theory will be used, through arguments both by contemporary theorists such as Terry Eagleton and John Fiske, who will contribute with post-proletarian-revolution, slightly pessimistic views of communism as applied to reality, and by earlier theorists who have operated at different stages of Marxism, more specifically Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci.

## The Foundation of The Commitments

*Who buys the most records?  
The workin' class.  
Are yis with me?*

**R. Doyle**

The Commitments seem to have a Marxist agenda. They complain about the state of oppression of the Irish working class, a class which they consider themselves belonging to, and they decide that the people of this class are who they are going to play for. However, looking more closely at this Marxist agenda, one finds that the aim of the band members is not to put an end to the oppression, but rather to leave the working class, to rise in society, to earn themselves a place on the other side of the oppressive system. This first section will examine the foundation of The Commitments, after some background information.

Already in the foundation of the band we see that its Marxist rhetoric does not come from below; rather, it is something that is orchestrated from above. The original members, Outspan, Derek and Ray start a band. Outspan and Derek go to see Jimmy Rabbitte, for consultation, because “Jimmy Rabbitte [knows] his music” (1). Jimmy convinces them that what is “in” at the moment is “sex an’ politics” (7), and therefore, that is what the songs they pick should be about. Soul music is what they should be playing, because the Irish need some soul. They kick Ray out (because Jimmy says so) and start looking for new band members. An advertisement is posted in the local newspaper, and already here proletarian references can be found. This is what Jimmy writes in the ad:

Have you got Soul? If yes, The World’s Hardest Working Band is looking for you. Contact J. Rabbitte, 118, Chestnut Ave., Dublin 21. Rednecks and southsiders need not apply (11).

Two crucial features, both of which will be further analysed, can be detected in this advertisement. Firstly, the fact that they define themselves as “the world’s hardest working band” confirms the image that they are building, the image of a band of workers, a band of

real people. Related to that is the fact that they are only looking for musicians of the same kind, so that the image will not be stained. Consequently, it is of great importance that all band members are from northside Dublin, because northside Dubliners are considered the real people. Just as importantly, the band members must be workers, because workers are the real people. As we will see later on, the band's fixed idea of who "the people" are, and their distinction between "the people" and others, is also of importance in this analysis.

Thus, the Marxist rhetoric is pure image construction directed from above. Jimmy starts managing the band and helps them create an appropriate image. He decides that music for the working-class is what is right at the moment, and he looks for band members to fit with this music and with the image that follows. He finds a singer at his own work, Deco, with just the right voice for the songs they are supposed to be singing, a keyboardist, James, who has been kicked out of the folk mass choir for playing The Chicken Song on the organ in church, and from the auditions subsequent to the ad, he finds Billy who plays the drums and Dean, who owns a saxophone but does not yet play it that well. All of these new band members have in common the fact that they fit with the image that Jimmy is creating for them. Another interesting aspect of the formation of the band's image is the role of the back-up vocalists, The Commitmentettes, who are brought into the band last. As Jimmy does not know whether or not they can sing when he asks them to be in the band, they are hired based on their good looks only, i.e. their role in the band is to add to the image and not to the music. One can of course discuss whether they add to the Marxist ideas of the band, but the fact that their role is first and foremost image-related remains. Before The Commitmentettes come into the picture, however, Joey The Lips Fagan shows up.

Joey The Lips Fagan is a skilled rhetorician, and he is the one who brings the appropriate Marxist terminology to the rhetoric of the band. He is a trumpet player who has, according to himself, played with James Brown, Sinatra, Otis Redding, Stevie Wonder and

the Beatles, to name just a few. If anyone knows soul music, it is Joey The Lips. When talking to a reporter from Northside News, he states the band's mission as follows: "We are bringing the music, the Soul, back to the people. – The proletariat. – That's p,r,o,l,e,t,a,r,i,a,t" (112). Joey The Lips and Jimmy Rabbitte are thus politicising the band and the music of the band, and the fact that Joey The Lips feels a need to spell out the word proletariat suggests first of all that prior to this, politics was not to any significant extent associated with music, at least not with mainstream music, in Ireland, and second of all that this is something that he himself is aware of.

The tendency of non-interest in politics can also be seen at the very beginning of the novel, as the band members seem to have no interest in, or knowledge of, neither politics nor political music prior to their consulting Jimmy Rabbitte. Outspan's guitar has a sticker reading "This Guitar Kills Fascists" (2), which is a clear reference to the slogan Woody Guthrie had on his guitar, reading "This machine kills fascists." This sticker would match quite well with the image that the band later create for themselves, but in the very beginning of the band's existence, Outspan tries his best to pull the sticker off. It was "his brother, an awful hippy, [who] had put on it" (2). Furthermore, the fact that even this "awful hippy" has little knowledge of the politics of music, misquoting Guthrie's sticker, supports the argument that mixing music and politics is something that is quite new to the young Irish working-class of the 1980s.

The fact that Marxist politics are given to the band members from above, i.e. from Jimmy Rabbitte and Joey The Lips, is something that links the structure of *The Commitments* to the communist Soviet Union. At that time and place, Marxism, in the sense that the term was used, was not necessarily connected to the political and economic ideas of Marx, but to the leadership of the union and to the ideas that this leadership had at the moment. Leszek Kolakowski concludes that "[y]ou were a Marxist not because you regarded any particular

ideas – Marx’s, Lenin’s, or even Stalin’s – as true, but because you were prepared to accept whatever the supreme authority might proclaim today, tomorrow, or in a year’s time” (Kolakowski 4). The situation of the band members is arguably similar, since it is the ideas of the leaders that determine the ideology of the band, and the band members’ conformity to these ideas is of great importance.

“[B]ringing the music, the Soul, back to the people” (112) becomes the stated agenda of The Commitments, and Outspan and Derek are convinced when Jimmy, who is quite a skilled rhetorician, puts words to the oppression they feel they are victims of. “The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads [...] An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland [...] An’ the northside Dubliners are the niggers o’ Dublin” (9). In other words, if you search through all of Europe, you will not find another group of people as oppressed as the northside Dubliners.

The fact that the Irish are associated with blackness seems not to be a new phenomenon. As Lorraine Piroux notes, in the early days of British colonisation, the Irish were quite frequently “identified as being essentially black and [...] incriminated with the same stereotyping rhetoric used against people of color” (Piroux 48). However, this does not seem to be what Jimmy Rabbitte refers to when he identifies his fellow Irishmen with “niggers.” This statement seems to act only to convince the band members of their state of oppression within Ireland, and within Dublin, and not to initiate a discussion of oppressive colonisers, or solidarity with oppressed minorities. As Piroux later concludes, “[w]ith The Commitments, Irish Blackness is stripped of its previous genealogical, anthropological, biological, and racial determinations,” (Piroux 50). Instead, it is important to note, in this context blackness seems to be connected to class rather than to skin colour. As McGlynn notes, “[t]he word ‘nigger’ [...] becomes a class signifier rather than a racial one” (McGlynn 237). The term “nigger” is used to evoke a sense of oppression not necessarily linked to the black/white, or colonised/coloniser, racial hierarchy, but to the upper-class/working-class economic



hierarchy, a symbolic comparison which is made possible by the fact that in many instances race and class coincide.

Conclusively, since “[s]oul is the politics o’ the people” (39), and The Commitments are bringing soul music back to the people, one might suppose that the band’s agenda is to spread their politics, their Marxist ideology, to the surrounding world. However, this seems not to be the case. Having established the Marxist rhetoric and ostensible agenda of the band, one might turn to look at the way this agenda is, or is not, carried through. An important issue that the band must take into consideration is the fact that once the group of working-class youth has some success in the music industry, success that is presumably due, at least to a certain extent, to the fact that they are working-class youth, they are no longer working-class. As McGlynn suggests, “[t]he entrepreneurial savvy of the band represents simultaneously the empowerment of a group of working-class youth and the limitations and compromises inherent in this particular mode of self-improvement” (McGlynn 234). This presents two problems. Firstly, the people can no longer identify themselves with the band members, who are no longer “of the people,” and consequently their image as a band “of the people” is damaged. Secondly, the concept of making money by exploiting one’s own oppressed state while using Marxist expressions might in itself be questioned. These two issues will be dealt with in the following section.

In order to be able to claim that they play for “the people,” the band, or rather the band’s management, must establish who the people are. As has already been mentioned, northside Dubliners are, according to Jimmy Rabbitte, the people. And for The Commitments, it is important that their audience is “the people,” if not, their image will be spoiled. That is why Jimmy is satisfied when they manage to fill quite a big pub with an audience they consider to be the people. “Jimmy was happy with the audience. So was Joey The Lips. These were The People” (123). Ambiguity can clearly be seen in this as well as in the above-mentioned ad, as

the definition of one quite specific group as “the people” more or less dismisses the communist idea of equality seen, for example, in Marx’s “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” containing his famous statement: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” Part I). Lisa McGonigle argues that with Jimmy’s definition of this particular audience as “the people,” “Doyle shows the discrepancy between [...] lofty statements [like soul is ‘REVOLUTION!’ (39)] and the reality of [the band’s] endeavours” (McGonigle 170). In light of this, the band can be concluded not to have a sincere Marxist objective, but instead to be using Marxist expressions in order to rise in the capitalist society. “Yis don’t want to end up like (he nodded his head back) –these tossers here. Amn’t I right?” (6) is what Jimmy says to Outspan and Derek when they first come to consult him. And that seems to become their goal, not to improve the lives of the tossers along with their own, but to rise and leave the tossers behind them.

Finally, returning to the epigraph of this chapter, because this is presumably where the strongest argument for hypocrisy in the Marxist rhetoric of the band can be found, one can see a clear capitalist goal behind all the words. “Wha’ class are yis? Workin’ class. Are yis proud of it? Yeah yis are. (Then a practical question.) –Who buys the most records? The workin’ class. Are yis with me?” (9). Marx proclaims that “[t]he wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’” (Marx, “Capital” 665). Commodities, Marx argues, are no longer valued in terms of usefulness; instead they are given an exchange-value, a value that is established by their relation to other commodities. In other words, a commodity that sells well has a high exchange-value. Commodities and their exchange-value are, according to Marx, a prerequisite for the capitalist structure to work.

Linking this to the music of The Commitments, then, one can see a clear favour of exchange-value over use-value in the way the music of the band is appreciated. Soul music

does not have a high use-value for any of the band members except for Joey The Lips; they have never heard it before. It does, however, just as Jimmy foresees, turn out to have a high exchange-value. The band's music is commodified, and since the working-class are the ones who buy the most records, working-class rhetoric is what they need to use in order to reach their capitalist goals.

In the hypocrisy of using Marxism as a capitalist strategy a parallel between the novel and Stalin's Soviet Union can be found. The Commitments use expressions connected to the proletariat and commitment to the proletariat, but what their aim arguably is, is to sell records. The band does not aim at improving the state of the working-class, they are merely using them as a tool to increase their own capital. In a similar way, the proletariat was used by Stalin to increase the production of the country. Kolakowski declares that "the function of the enslaved peasantry was to supply surplus value for the rapid development of industry" (Kolakowski 77). Thus, the workers' situation in the communist Soviet Union was arguably not improved, they were merely used to increase the production and profit of the country. Similarly, The Commitments lure the working-class with their Marxist rhetoric, but in reality they are only aiming at increasing their own profit.

The band's use of Marxist expressions and their construction of a Marxist image in order to score, as it were, with the Irish working-class, and thus to achieve fame and fortune, might give the impression of being a conscious move. It might seem as though their strategy, from the beginning, is to trick their audience into identifying with them, and consequently into coming to their concerts and buying their records. They seem to be using their oppressed state, their working-class state, as a capitalist strategy. However, the matter is not as simple as it, at first glance, appears to be.

Some might consider the aspiration for fame and fortune to be something inherent in the human being. In line with a kind of social Darwinism, they might thus claim that the band's

inability to live up to their Marxist ideals is due to an unconscious desire, and that therefore, it is simply inevitable. The idea of biological heredity would be dismissed, however, by Marxist critics. Instead, this desire would be seen as something taught by the forces of capitalist society. Gramsci introduces the concept of “hegemony,” by which he means the way the dominance by a certain group over another is maintained through education and cultural practices:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [...] is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci 673)

The leading forces of capitalism are prestigious, but only because they, through their leading position, keep control over education and culture. They indoctrinate the minds of the masses with the view that fame, fortune and power are what one is supposed to want. This Gramscian view would dismiss the opinion that the band members have an innate wish for power, but at the same time it promotes the idea that this wish is in a way unconscious. At any rate, fundamentally it is not, even though it might appear to be, deliberate.

The capitalist education that is given in the western world creates obstacles not only for the development of the band, but for its initial composition as well. Since the capitalist way of managing the world is what Jimmy, the manager, has been taught, it is difficult for him to direct the band with any other method. As McGlynn proclaims, “[w]hile Jimmy espouses and appears to believe in collectivism and an egalitarian social organization, he only knows how to organize his group in a conventional capitalist structure” (McGlynn 239). For that reason and with that background, the idea of a Marxist structure seems predestined to fail.

Thus, the story of the band has similarities with many real life attempts at Marxist societal structures. Although such attempts have been made, just as Marx predicted, it seems few of these attempts have been successful. Recent Marxist critics seem to have deserted the

idea of a working Marxist society. To repeat Fiske's statement, "[t]his sort of idealism seems inappropriate to the late twentieth century, which appears to have demonstrated not the inevitable self-destruction of capitalism but its unpredicted (by Marx) ability to reproduce itself and incorporate into itself the forces of resistance and opposition" (1269). Linking this to *The Commitments*, one can conclude that in spite of the band's professed Marxist ideology, capitalism has found its way into its structure, and has eliminated every sense of community there might have been. The story of the band ends with its break up, subsequent to a big fight about individual development and individual careers: "Well, said Deco. –Let's put it this way. –I've me career to think of" (138). He feels that his own musical skills have developed more than those of the band as a whole (his community). He feels that he has grown out of his community; he has become a musical capitalist rather than a musical proletarian. And in the end, one might argue that every man for himself is the fundamental model of capitalist society, and thus, that no matter what ostensible ideology, and no matter how important community might ostensibly be, when an opportunity presents itself it is hard not to take it. This is not because of an inherent desire for fame and fortune, if one shall believe Gramsci, but because the western capitalist education has made impossible everything but a desire for fame and fortune.

### **The Music of The Commitments**

*Soul is community.*

**R. Doyle**

The choice of music style is of great importance to the creation of the Marxist image of *The Commitments*. A prerequisite for this statement to be valid and significant to this analysis, however, is the establishment of certain music styles, particularly soul and jazz, as politically charged. Within the scope of *The Commitments*, Joey The Lips prescribes, with his accounts

on soul and jazz, political attributes to these music styles. His perception of soul music and his statements about it are largely associated with community and egalitarianism. Firstly, he says that “[s]oul is democratic [...] Anyone with a bin lid can play it. – It’s the people’s music” (124). It is not too complex, not too advanced, and for that reason it is available to more people, both in terms of playing it and listening to it.

Secondly, Joey talks about soul as a musical unity without individualistic improvisations that distinguish themselves from the rest of the music: “Strictly speaking, Brother, soul solos aren’t really solos at all [...] There are no gaps in soul. If it doesn’t fit it isn’t used. Soul is community” (134). Soul solos do not, according to Joey The Lips, have the purpose of discerning one individual part from the rest of the song, or one individual player from the rest of the band. On the contrary, “[i]n a soul group, [...] the individual is less significant than the ways in which individuals combine and interrelate” (Norquay and Smyth 161). The solos should fit so smoothly into the rest of the song that they are hardly discernible, because if they do distinguish themselves they do not fit into the democratic, communal feeling of the music, and if that is the case they have no place in a soul song.

In this reasoning, one can see a parallel between soul music and communism as a political ideology. They both share the sense of community and cooperation, and they dismiss the idea of individual prosperity and distinction. Hence, the music that the band (or Jimmy and Joey The Lips, rather) decide to play has a symbolic value when it comes to arguing the band’s Marxist orientation, and accordingly, the music that the band decide not to play, jazz, has the same symbolic value.

Having recognised soul as democratic, Joey the Lips goes on to proclaim that “[j]azz is the antithesis of soul” (124). “It’s anti-people music. It’s abstract” (125), he says, claiming that contrary to soul, jazz is complex and selfish music, music for intellectuals rather than for “the people.” He maintains his argument when Dean, the saxophone player who in the early

days of the band could not play at all but who after much practice has become quite a skilled player, suddenly decides to replace the solo he has always played with an advanced, improvised one. This new solo does not stay within the “corners” of the song, as Joey The Lips calls them (134); it very clearly distinguishes Dean from the rest of the band: “That’s jazz, Brother,” Joey The Lips says. “That’s what jazz does. It makes the man selfish” (134).

If one can see references to communism in the statements about soul music, the same can indeed be said about capitalism and jazz. Firstly, jazz, in its complexity, leaves the ordinary people behind as it aims at entertaining intellectuals. Secondly, since it is difficult to play, only a skilled musician, a musical capitalist to reuse that idea, can manage it. Thus, just as capitalism creates gaps between classes based on capital, jazz creates gaps between musicians based on musical skills, and these gaps are just as unsuitable for a soul band as they are for a communist society. Thirdly, as jazz creates these gaps, it simultaneously constructs an individualistic attitude of self-worth and superiority that is not supposed to exist within a soul band. Again, a connection between The Commitments and a communist society can be seen; replace the word “jazz” with “capitalism” and “soul band” with “communist society” in the previous sentence, and the similarities will become clear.

Finally, to fuel the argument of the symbolic value of soul and jazz even more, Joey the Lips’ declaration of jazz in communist Russia, saying that “[t]he Russians were right. They banned it” (126) can be used. This again points to Joey The Lips’ Marxist point of view, and at the same time it implies that jazz has previously been seen as anti-communist.

Music, and art in general, was indeed something the communists of post-revolutionary Russia concerned themselves with. The movement *Proletkult* was established, with the intention to create “a purely proletarian culture cleansed of bourgeois influences” (Eagleton 37), and it was generally held that culture should be committed to party politics. “*Proletkult* regarded art as a class weapon and completely rejected bourgeois culture [seeking] to develop

a distinctively proletarian art which would organize working-class ideas and feelings towards collectivist rather than individualist goals” (Eagleton 39). Two similarities between this reasoning and that of Joey The Lips are equally important to this analysis.

First is the idea of collectivism vs. individualism, i.e. the importance of music invoking a collectivist feeling. Joey’s opinion is that this is not what jazz, with its solos, does, and the idea of solos has elsewhere been discussed in the same context. Peter Manuel quotes Janos Marothy, who writes that “[i]n music, the main formal expression of ‘ego-centeredness’ is the solo song, emerging as the central category of bourgeois music as a whole” (Manuel 53). This epitomises Joey the Lips’ views, albeit song is what is discussed here. Instrumental solos are certainly as individual as vocal ones. Thus, he is organising his fellow proletarian band members with the same goal as that of *Proletkult*.

Second is the importance of commitment, also crucial in this context bearing in mind the name of the band. The view of *Proletkult* was, as previously mentioned, that ideas expressed through art should commit to the politics of the communist party. Drawing parallels between *The Commitments* and post-revolutionary Russia, one can see that Joey The Lips seems to share this opinion. Commitment to the proletarian politics of the band, i.e. to soul music, is incredibly important, and divergence from it is unacceptable. Also, in Stalin’s Soviet Union as well as in *The Commitments*, the main purpose of the music is not to focus on specific political details, what is important is that it spreads a collectivist approach. As T. W. Adorno concludes, “[c]ommitted art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts, or practical institutions [...] but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (Adorno 190). Thus, here is yet another instance where the allegorical value of *The Commitments* in the context of communist politics is prominent.

Taking the idea of commitment one step further, Althusser’s concept of “ideology” can successfully be applied to the whole situation of the band, and more specifically to Dean’s



saxophone playing. Althusser argued that “world outlooks,” such as, for example, religion and politics, are to a large extent imaginary and do not correspond to reality, consequently describing ideology as representing “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 693). However, although a person’s “world view” is imaginary, it is required of this person to conform to this ideology:

[T]he ideological representation of ideology is itself forced to recognize that every “subject” endowed with a “consciousness” and believing in the “ideas” that his “consciousness” inspires in him and freely accepts, must “*act* according to his ideas,” must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, “that is wicked.” (Althusser 696)

In this concept of conformity to one’s ideology we find a general prerequisite for keeping a credible image, and thus this is what is interesting in the context of Dean’s saxophone playing, and more widely the band’s considerate attention to their image.

Dean practices his saxophone playing and becomes a skilled player. He wants to use his skills and starts listening to and playing jazz songs. His band, however, having established that jazz is not the people’s music, does not let him play it. Generally, acting against one’s own rhetoric is often considered immoral, and since they have constructed this Marxist image for themselves, acting outside the image would be considered, as Althusser declares, “wicked.” In a wider context, this idea can be applied to the whole story of *The Commitments*, since, as has previously been asserted, there is a certain level of hypocrisy in their use of communist rhetoric. It is certainly debateable whether or not *The Commitments* are acting according to their (alleged) ideology, but still there is no sign, from any of the band members, of wanting to dissociate from that “wickedness.” One would imagine that becoming rich and starting to move away from the state of oppression they have been in would do just as much damage to a Marxist image as a jazz solo would, if not even more. But it seems that is not the case. Presumably, since rising out of the oppressed class is the covert aim of the band, as this essay has argued, that “wickedness” is wisely overlooked.

Up to this point, this chapter has established the music of the band as a further contribution to its Marxist image. The Commitments play soul music instead of jazz to gain listeners among “the people.” This leads us back to the highly problematic issue, profitably discussed in the context of successful working-class bands and already touched upon above, of making money by exploiting one’s oppressed background and by using Marxist rhetoric to lure the working-class into buying records and coming to – i.e. paying for – concerts. This type of hypocrisy is arguably difficult to avoid, due to the fact that the constitution of the western capitalist culture brings with it the idea of commodification. However, one can consequently then reflect on whether working-class music is rebellious at all, or whether it is simply a conventional genre of music like any other, and thus a discourse of the ruling culture like any other. Considering the commodification of this type of music, it seems legitimate to question the validity of it as insubordinate to the capitalist ruling class and culture. Jacques Attali argues that “the music industry is an instrument of social pacification that gives each person the illusion of tasting forbidden passions” (Attali xi), and if it is merely that, then it is precisely a cultural discourse which serves, through falsely leading people to believe that they are part of a revolt, not to undermine the ruling class but to confirm it. Simultaneously, as in the case of *The Commitments*, it works as a way for people to switch sides within the class structure, i.e. for poor working-class musicians to rise into a higher class.

Here, once again, Fiske’s statement about capitalism’s ability to survive attacks helps us understand the allegorical significance of *The Commitments* when it comes to real life struggles between communism and capitalism, struggles that capitalism has seemingly mostly, or arguably always, won. There have, as previously mentioned, been attacks on capitalism and attempts to establish communism, but they seem always to fail, and this is what will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

## The Animal Farm of The Commitments

*Under capitalism, man exploits man.  
Under communism, it's just the opposite.*

**J. K. Galbraith**

*The creatures outside looked from pig to man,  
and from man to pig, and from pig to man again:  
but already it was impossible to say which was which.*

**G. Orwell**

The aim of this essay has thus far been to argue for the symbolic value of *The Commitments* when it comes to showing the difficulties of making communism work in a capitalist world, and also to analyse why these difficulties appear. Accordingly, one can claim that *The Commitments* can be seen as an allegory of an attempt to create a communist society. Orwell's *Animal Farm* is presumably the most famous allegory of a communist revolution and attempt to a communist societal structure, and therefore, the following section will be devoted to establishing the value of *The Commitments* as an allegory not only through textual examples from the novel itself, but also through displaying similarities between *The Commitments* and *Animal Farm*.

The symbolic value of *Animal Farm* in this context seems to be undisputed. There may be diverse opinions on what exactly the political message of the novel is, but the fact that it exists is seldom questioned. The novel describes an English countryside farm ruled by Man, an evil drunk named Mr Jones. The animals of the farm join together in a revolt chasing Mr Jones off the farm, and subsequently they start building a democratic, classless society where every animal contributes according to its own ability, and where every animal is given of the produce according to its needs, all under seven commandments, the last and most important one being "All animals are equal" (Orwell 15).

As time passes and the farm prospers, however, the pigs of the farm, who have from the beginning taken the role of leaders of the society, are transformed and gradually taken over by

greed. They demand harder work for lower “wages,” and instead of letting all produce go back to the workers, they start trading it with other farms in the pursuit for higher profit. This profit is used to buy commodities like alcohol and cigars, in other words it is used to increase the pigs’ wealth. Thus, the capitalism that the animals once fought, side by side, has been brought back by the pigs.

One can of course discuss what the reason behind the failure of the farm’s democratic communist structure is. V. C. Letemendia points to innate stupidity and lack of education as reasons, and consequently, she argues that “Orwell is not implying by this the hopelessness of a proletarian revolution: he rather points to the need for education and self-confidence in any working class movement if it is to remain democratic in character” (Letemendia 129). What Orwell is implying or not implying is of course impossible to know for sure, and whether or not the text has the implication that Letemendia dismisses is certainly debateable. It does seem just as feasible to see just that, “the hopelessness of a proletarian revolution,” as the text’s most important implication.

Earlier in the same article, Letemendia quotes Orwell from an essay he wrote prior to *Animal Farm*<sup>1</sup>, where he writes that “what you get over and over again is a movement of the proletariat which is promptly canalized and betrayed by astute people at the top, and then the growth of a new governing class” (Letemendia 127). And indeed this is what repeatedly seems to be taking place. Attempts to create absolute equality, a society where “All animals are equal” (Orwell 15), usually seem to end up with “some animals [being] more equal than others” (Orwell 90). With Orwell’s statement in mind, and his rewriting of the animals’ seventh commandment at the end of the novel, it seems legitimate to argue that what *Animal Farm* implies is capitalist individualism’s aptitude for triumph over communist solidarity, and thus “the hopelessness of a proletarian revolution.” *The Commitments* has similar tendencies,

---

<sup>1</sup> Orwell, Sonia and Angus Ian, eds. *The Collected Essays, Journalisms and Letters of George Orwell*. (Penguin, 1971), Vol. 1, p. 372.

the same message can be pointed out, and this can be highlighted through a comparative reading between *Animal Farm* and *The Commitments*.

The fundamentals of the band are undoubtedly comparable to those of the animal farm, as they are both of a communist nature. The band members and the animals are all seen as part of the exploited working-class, and their common enemy is the exploiting rulers. The animals use their oppressed state as motivation to overthrow Mr Jones and form their own community, and similarly the band use their oppressed state as motivation to form The Commitments. They both have strong leaders using Marxist rhetoric; the animals have the pigs and The Commitments have Joey The Lips and Jimmy Rabbitte, and consequently, they are both top-down constructions, i.e. both “revolutions” are conducted by leaders and not by animals or band members collectively.

Subsequent to the formation is the time of improvement and prosperity. The band members are improving their skills collectively, they give a number of commended concerts, and all seems well. The animals of the farm work, everyone does what he or she does best, and together they improve their standard of living dramatically. This is when problems begin to occur, both in the band and on the farm. Individualist wishes for success sneak in and disrupt the peace of the two communal structures. On the farm it is, as previously accounted for, the pigs, and particularly one pig named Napoleon, who are taken over by such wishes. In The Commitments, Deco and Dean, the singer and the saxophone player, are the clearest examples of this individualist development.

Neither Dean nor Deco have much musical experience before they join the band. Deco has once sung at a party, and Jimmy heard him, but at that time he was drunk and so unaware of himself that he does not remember it. In other words, at the beginning of the band’s history, he is a musical novice like the rest of the band members. The same is true for Dean, who owns a saxophone but cannot play it. Then, although the whole band starts improving their

musical skills through practice, Deco and Dean develop more than the others. As they do so, they start to feel that the band, firstly with Joey The Lips' conformist view on soul and community, and secondly with the limited skills of the other band members, is an obstacle in the way of their individual careers. Dean is not allowed to play advanced solos, and he is not content with that. He says "I went through hell tryin' to learn to play the sax. I nearly jacked it in after every rehearsal. Now I can play it. An' I'm not stoppin'. I want to get better" (143). He has become a musical capitalist who is not satisfied with being a band equal. He wants to continue his improvement and put his real abilities on show. He wants to excel, and within the walls of the band, as within the walls of a communist society, there is no place for individual excellence.

Deco, on the other hand, not as much develops his musical skills as realises them. He is not particularly interested in singing before he is asked to join the band, but the more he sings, the more people praise his voice, and the more he is interested in flaunting it. He too feels that the less talented band members are impeding his career, and he applies to sing in the "National Song Contest" alone. "Well," he says, "–Let's put it this way. –I've me career to think of" (138). As it appears, the band's success is not enough for him, and thus he seeks individual recognition. His own career is more important to him than that of The Commitments, and it seems that the more he is individually acclaimed, and the more he realises his own ability, the lower his wish to keep to the communal structure of the band becomes. In other words, his wish for individual success is brought onto him from outside. He is taught capitalist values and caught in the capitalist trap of seeking individual success. The Gramscian view of capitalism as something taught and learned, which is accounted for in the first chapter of this essay, is yet again applicable.

Accordingly, the downfall of the The Commitments is similar to that of the Animal Farm. While both the band and the farm prosper, a few individuals are discontent with merely

being part of a successful group. They yearn for individual triumph, and as a result, the communist structures of both the band and the farm fall apart. Arguably, the similarities between the two novels are prominent. It is important to note, however, that *Animal Farm* was written with an alleged allegorical purpose, something that *The Commitments* could not be claimed to be. Therefore, *The Commitments* observably does not have the accuracy of *Animal Farm* when it comes to symbolising actual historical events. John Rodden writes about different levels of symbolism in *Animal Farm*. First, he gives it the epithet of a “historical satire of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet dictatorship [...] [that] covers exact historical correspondences between the events of *Animal Farm* and Soviet history up to 1943” (Rodden 73). On this level, it would not be apposite to argue *The Commitments*’ correspondence to *Animal Farm*. However, Rodden suggests a second level of symbolism in Orwell’s novel, not restricted to criticising the Soviet Union, and it is here that similarities can be found. He argues that “*Animal Farm* is a political treatise that suggests larger lessons about power, tyranny, and revolution in general” (73), and as general allegories, the two novels have much in common.

To conclude, the first epigraph of this chapter is a quote from the Canadian-American economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who like many others suggests the unfeasibility of a real life communist utopia. His short aphorism: “Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism, it's just the opposite,”<sup>2</sup> arguably describes quite well what repeatedly seems to happen when communism is put on trial in reality. Capitalism is exploitive, but under the name of communism, just as many have been exploited. The second epigraph implies the same idea, in that it can be argued to symbolise the farm animals’ realisation that their egalitarian community, their utopia, has turned out to be not the least bit different from the oppressive capitalist hierarchy they experienced under the rule of Mr Jones. What frightens

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/810.html> 11 March 2008.

the animals is that the pigs, their equals, have turned into men, their formerly common oppressors. In other words, their communist comrades have turned into greedy, egotistic capitalists. Similarly viewing *The Commitments* as an allegory, one can find that the same has happened to Deco and Dean. They are no longer willing to be comrades; they want individual success and recognition.

## **Conclusion**

*The Commitments* has an allegorical value in that it symbolises and demonstrates the difficulties of establishing a well-functioning communist community in a capitalist world. This is supported, firstly, by the fact that the band and their management officially make use of Marxist rhetoric while their more private aims are of a capitalist nature. The choice to aim for a working-class audience is largely decided by the fact that Jimmy Rabbitte presumes that it is the working-class that buys the most records. The hypocrisy in their actions can be linked to post-revolutionary Russia, where the working-class was used, despite rhetoric about equality and justice, to increase the profit of the country, which was to be enjoyed by the privileged elite.

Secondly, by establishing the symbolic value of the people's soul music as opposed to the "higher art" jazz music, and viewing the musical types in the context of the development of some of the band members from comrades to capitalists, the allegorical value of the novel can once again be determined. Considering Joey The Lips' description of soul as "the people's music" (124) and jazz as "anti-people music" (125) that "makes the man selfish" (134), one can argue that the music of the novel in itself has symbolic value when it comes to representing the struggle between communism and capitalism. Additionally, the fact that commitment to the collectivist soul music is of great importance to the band recalls Stalin's



Soviet Union, where the movement *Proletkult* stated the importance of art expressing communal rather than individualist ideas.

Thirdly and finally, similarities between the story of the band and that of the animals of Orwell's *Animal Farm* have been pointed out to further emphasise the symbolic value of *The Commitments* in this context, as the symbolic value of Orwell's novel is widely recognised. Similarities between the two novels can be found in the foundation of both the farm and the band, as in both cases a state of oppression is used as a motivation for the formation. Subsequent to the formation is, in both novels, a time of improvement and prosperity. However, the prosperous time does not last, and it is, again in both novels, followed by a breakdown caused by some characters' (pigs, singers or saxophone players) reluctance to conform to the communal structure and by their desire for individual success.

Returning one final time to Fiske's statement about capitalism's "ability to reproduce itself and incorporate into itself the forces of resistance and opposition" (Fiske 1269), one can conclude that *The Commitments* is an example depicting precisely this. Attacks against capitalism have been made, followed by attempts at communist societal structures, but as it seems, there is great difficulty in making such a structure work. The same is true for the communal organisation that Jimmy Rabbitte and Joey The Lips aim for with *The Commitments*. It works as long as all band members are equal, i.e. as long as they all are musical proletarians, but as soon as some of them start developing faster than the others, the egalitarian constitution is hard to maintain. Dean and Deco are skilled musicians, and they want to let people see that. They do not want to keep within the "corners" of soul music and they do not want to keep within the "corners" of the band. They have gone through the transformation from musical proletarians to greedy musical capitalists who once they have reached a certain state of fame and fortune only want more. Thus, they show the same tendency as the pigs of *Animal Farm* do. The pigs change from comrades to greedy capitalists

who are not content with the state of well being that the post-revolutionary farm arrives at, but instead seek ways to constantly increase produce and profit for the sake of being able to improve their own situation. The new musical capitalists of The Commitments are similarly not content with being part of a band, they are not content with being Marxist comrades. To them, what is much more appealing than equality is the chance of becoming capitalist pigs.

## Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. "Commitment." *Marxist Literary Theory*, eds. Eagleton, Terry and Milne, Drew. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. 187-203.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 693-702.
- Attali, Jacques. Foreword. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. Ed. Burckhardt Qureshi, Regula. New York: Routledge, 2002. ix-xiii.
- Doyle, Roddy. *The Commitments*. London: Vintage, 1998.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1976.
- Fiske, John. "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 1268-1273.
- Gramsci, Antonio. "Hegemony." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 673.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism 3: The Breakdown*. Trans. P.S. Falla. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978.
- Letemendia, V.C. "Revolution on Animal Farm." *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 18, No.1 (1992): 127-139.
- Manuel, Peter. "Modernity and Musical Structure: Neo-Marxist Perspectives on Song Form and Its Successors." *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*, ed. Burckhardt Qureshi, Regula. New York: Routledge, 2002. 45-62.
- Marx, Karl. "Capital." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 665-672.
- . "Critique of the Gotha Programme." *Marx/Engels Selected Works Volume Three*, 1970. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 13-30. Online. mea; marxists.org. Internet. 16 April 2008.  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>

- McGlynn, Mary. "Why Jimmy Wears a Suit: White, Black, and Working Class in *The Commitments*." *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004): 232-251.
- McGonigle, Lisa. "Rednecks and Southsiders Need Not Apply: Subalternity and Soul in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*." *Irish Studies Review* Vol. 13, No. 2 (2005): 163-173.
- Norquay, Glenda and Smyth Gerry. "Waking up in a Different Place: Contemporary Irish and Scottish Fiction." *Across the Margins: Cultural Identity and Change in the Atlantic Archipelago*, eds. Norquay, Glenda and Smyth, Gerry. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. 154-170.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. London: Penguin. 1989.
- Piroux, Lorraine. "'I'm black an' I'm proud': Re-inventing Irishness in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*." *College Literature* Vol. 25, No. 2 (1998): 45-58.
- Rodden, John. "Appreciating *Animal Farm* in the New Millennium." *Modern Age* Vol. 45, No. 1 (2003): 67-77.