

“The Full Monty”, the 1997 British comedy film directed by Peter Cattaneo, tells a complex economic story for the viewer with a critical eye. The end of the story, insofar as we can see from the movie, may appear utterly ridiculous at first glance. A group of regular guys stripping naked and dancing seductively in front of their wives and fellow townspeople is shocking. But these guys reached this point as a result of a variety of circumstances that deserve some examination. In this paper, I will consider four distinct economic phases which I believe are relevant to the characters’ lives. No particular economic theory is sufficient to explain what happened in Sheffield, England in reality or within the film. I will utilize various economic concepts and draw from renowned economic thinkers to present “The Full Monty”’s economic story. First, however, it is necessary to give a little background regarding the steel industry in northern England and the changes that occurred there by the time of the film.

The city of Sheffield is located in South Yorkshire, England where the effects of the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century were extremely significant. In 1856, Henry Bessemer developed a technique in Sheffield which allowed for the mass production of steel (Investinsheffield). This development essentially made Sheffield king of the steel world. Its products, which included stainless steel cutlery and railroad tracks, were shipped around Europe and across the Atlantic to America. Though both the United States and Germany had overtaken Britain in terms of steel output by 1890, Sheffield’s dominance in the industry continued through the middle of the twentieth century. Through two world wars, Sheffield provided arms for Britain. By the 1960s, however, companies such as the British Steel Corporation faced problems of outdated technology, poor assets, high coal and oil costs, and increasing competition from the world market.

The steel industry in England was re-privatized in the 1980s, and the steel work force was drastically cut (Citizendium). Sheffield was hit particularly hard, and the city became a symbol for unemployment and urban blight by the 1990s. This is the context in which “The Full Monty” is situated.

When the movie begins, the viewer is shown a 1972 video proclaiming Sheffield as “the beating heart of Britain’s industrial north.” The economic prosperity displayed was, in reality, already being undermined by the downfall of the steel industry twenty-five years before the film. By 1997, Sheffield had certainly moved beyond the first economic phase that I believe is relevant to the film. This phase was a time of productive laborers. Karl Marx’s *Capital* provides the best insight into the economic conditions of the first phase, and it is crucial to understand the phase which provides the background and gives rise to the events of the film.

Four of the six men who make up the ‘Hot Metal’ strip act were steel workers. They were once able to find a consumer for their physical labor. This consumer was the owner of the steel factory. We are never introduced to the owner in the film, but we assume that because Sheffield was a thriving center of the steel trade, a man’s labor-power could be sold readily as a commodity on the market. These transactions can be classified as the sale and purchase of labor-power. For Marx, labor-power was “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind” (Marx 270). A person’s use-value, like any other use-value, can only be realized in consumption. Therefore, a person with labor-power will

protect his ownership of this labor-power and search for the right situation in which he can convert himself into a commodity.

When the steel mills and workshops in Sheffield were bustling, something more than just near-full employment was happening. Capitalism was working well because of the large amount of surplus value which was being created by the workers and appropriated by the owners. Part of the surplus was reinvested into the state-of-the-art machinery for the factories mentioned in the 1972 promotional video. A significant portion of it apparently went to the houses, bustling shops, and nightclubs. But none of the surplus went directly to the workers and this, according to Marx, would have been an obvious example of exploitation. The degree to which the main characters recognized this exploitation is unclear. What is clear is that compared to 1997, 1972 seemed pretty good. Steel provided steady jobs and a sense of certainty about one's life. In the second economic phase, things are dire. Gaz and Dave have been reduced to stealing scrap girders to sell for twenty quid apiece. Of course, even that attempt to earn money fails. As the movie progresses, we learn more about Gaz, Dave, and the rest of this 'reserve army of labor' in Sheffield and things have changed since 1972.

The situation of unemployment in the second phase is quite complex. We know the steel industry has all but disappeared, taking thousands of jobs with it. But many of the people who had those jobs have not disappeared. This is where Job Club comes in. At Job Club, we learn a lot about how the unemployed men are all struggling emotionally. They feel that they are no longer needed by employers or by their wives. Soon, Gaz claims, men will become completely obsolete. Jean, Dave's wife, admitted to her girlfriends in the strip club's bathroom that Dave already appears to have given up.

The only man who seems intent on moving forward is Gerald. He is first seen at the Job Club computer while the rest of the men are talking and playing cards. His situation is particularly interesting because he was once a foreman, a position of some degree of power and influence. Now, he is no different than any other man without employment.

Through Gerald, the viewer sees how it is difficult for someone to let go of the more comfortable lifestyle that used to be. Gerald's wife has no idea that her husband has been unemployed. She is concerned instead with their next ski vacation. She has been accustomed to expect that such luxuries will always exist for her and Gerald. When I saw the first scene in Gerald's home, I thought of the lecture Richard Wolff gave regarding the current economic crisis in the United States. Wolff said that between 1820 and 1970, profits and real wages were increasing steadily. He argued that Americans had become attached to consumption as a way of measuring themselves. When the working class's real wages stopped rising, they relied on credit to obtain the means necessary to consume the way they were used to. In "The Full Monty", Gerald is faced with a predicament similar to the one the American working class faced. He is no longer earning any wages at all. To deal with his situation, he decides to hide the truth from his wife while he searches for a solution.

Like Gerald, the five other men are suffering from feelings of inadequacy. All of them once had jobs they were proud of and seem to miss. All of them are unemployed when the film begins and all rely on transfer payments to survive. We can think of these transfer payments as some portion of the surplus which others have produced.

Everybody in Britain who has a National Insurance number must contribute to the Jobseeker's Allowance, commonly referred to as The Dole. England is a capitalist

country, so Marxian surplus value must be created. The money that is handed over to the government is then redistributed to those who are unemployed, provided they actively seek work through their local Job Centre (“Jobseeker’s Allowance”). The men from “The Full Monty”, with the exception of Gerald, do not seem very anxious to find new jobs. Maybe this is because they do not find any potential jobs appealing, or maybe it is because their pride is too great to work for very low wages. But there is also the possibility that the Dole payments they are receiving, though small, have lowered the incentive to working again. In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi blames the Speenhamland Law of 1795 for preventing the establishment of free labor market in England (Polanyi 82). The law provided a minimum allowance for the poor in cases of emergencies, but it was instead used universally across the English countryside. The moral hazard Polanyi noticed two hundred years ago may be similar to the situation in the film where the characters seem slow to re-enter the workforce. If they cannot have their old jobs back, they might rather have no job at all.

Dave, however, does eventually find a new job outside of ‘Hot Metal.’ The only job available for Dave is a security guard position at local department store. Gaz makes fun of Dave because of his new job, believing it is beneath him. It is not productive labor, but there do not appear to be any jobs available to the guys where their hard work will result in something tangible. Dave’s new job is economically different from the job he would have had in the steel industry. As a security guard, he is receiving a cut of the surplus created from the production of the goods in the store. He doesn’t really have to *do* anything on the job, but the presence of a security guard in the store is still deemed

necessary. Dave cannot find the solution to his feelings of inadequacy through a job like that, as evidenced by the fact that he becomes even more withdrawn.

I believe it is each individual's desperation to reclaim some sense of masculinity and purpose that drives them to consider stripping. The decision to do something about their unemployment ushers in the third economic phase of the film. Gaz faces the prospect of losing custody of his son Nathan because he cannot afford to pay child support. He is already beginning to lose Nathan's respect for him. Gaz cannot, for example, take Nathan to see his favorite football club. He buys Chinese food for dinner, apparently forgetting that Nathan doesn't like Chinese food. Though Nathan probably shouldn't have been exposed to his father's plan, he seems to realize that Gaz loves him and is simply "trying to get some brass together so as [Gaz] and [Nathan] can keep seeing each other." The third man to join the group, Lomper, tried to commit suicide and, as we learn later in the movie, is repressing homoerotic desires. The strip act is a way to get some money and self-respect.

This third phase, when 'Hot Metal' is practicing their act and making arrangements for the show, can be described in terms of the shock Naomi Klein discusses in *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein argues that a fundamentalist approach to markets requires shocks. The entire system on which neoliberal capitalism is built is fictional because it comes to exist via a destruction of the previous system and an introduction of purely capitalistic ideas to the destroyed state (Klein 60). This shock therapy was the dream of Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys. Though it may be a bit of a stretch, I believe the shock analogy can be extended to "The Full Monty". The shock in Sheffield occurred

when steel factories and workshops shut down and thousands of hard-working men were laid off. Their daily lives were altered suddenly and they were unprepared.

In the very first scene of the film, after the promotional video praising the city of Sheffield, Gaz mentions that they worked in the now run-down factory for ten years. This is a relatively long time considering Gaz and Dave are only middle-aged men. The shock that rendered them jobless must have been stunning. But, as Klein argues, shocks wear off eventually. This is what is happening when Gaz begins considering the idea that he and Dave should form a male stripping act. Without some sort of impetus, however, the shock may have continued into the future. The trigger for Gaz was the line of women outside the club anxiously awaiting the Chippendale show. He realized how profitable one night of erotic dancing could be. He also felt that, despite the conditions of his life, he was still far more masculine than any of the Chippendale dancers. If they could do it, how hard could it be?

The fourth and final economic phase of the movie begins when Hot Metal becomes a reality. The shock has worn off at least enough to the point where the men are ready to earn money again any way they can. I look at the strip act in the club as being its own kind of economy. It appears communistic in the sense that the formerly-unemployed members Hot Metal are not restricted to performing jobs available through private ownership, at least for one night. They rent the club, pay for the alcohol, and receive the ticket sales revenue. They are free to display their abilities as equal members of the group on stage in front of the women of Sheffield. But with the success of the show, it also seems these women have some concept of commodity consciousness. This

assumes that the six strippers have produced some kind of service by their own human labor.

If the act is a commodity, then men must themselves be the owners of the commodity because they own their bodies. The notion of commodity consciousness means that people actually care about how the commodity was produced and about the incomes of the commodity producers. There is concern for the economy of the community and a desire to understand the production process. Gaz has an ex-wife who, at least for the sake of Nathan, cares about his well-being. Dave's wife Jean wants to help him regain his confidence and reclaim the passion in their marriage. Gerald's wife knows how difficult it must have been for him to live six months with her knowing his professional life had fallen apart. Of course, the whole attraction of the show might have been Gaz's promise that the men would 'go all the way.' Even Chippendale's could not bare it all. But I believe some of the women who bought tickets to the show may have been looking to reward creativeness and bravery. They were willing to give money according to their means so that the men would receive according to their needs.

In the final analysis, we see that the show is a success and everybody in the club that night is happy. It is ironic that the characters whose dignity had been compromised by unemployment could find a sense of pride in exposing themselves on stage. To even consider pulling off an act like Hot Metal's required a vastly new type of masculinity than any the men had previously experienced. Though women may not have completely written off the unemployed men of Sheffield, I certainly felt like the men and women were at odds or at least lacked a mutual understanding. Alienated by the women, Gaz and the guys were able to bond in a way that would not have been possible in the days of

the steel industry. This is due mostly to the fact that the class identities that existed previously are “linked to work structures that no longer exist” (“Performing the crisis”). Gerald is no longer the foreman and Gaz and Dave are no longer simple laborers because the only thing that matters is that all of them are unemployed. In this new pseudo-classless male society of Sheffield, the idea of a group of blue-collar men forming a strip act is not so unfathomable. The full monty show and its positive reception, therefore, are a result of a combination of factors brought about by the destruction of one economic system and the personal and professional relationships that were associated with it.

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