

The Portrayal of Class Struggle in *Money Heist*

Jeremy Kayne Valiant¹, Setefanus Suprajitno²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University¹²
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA

E-mail: a11220035@john.petra.ac.id¹, steph@petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study explores the portrayal of class struggle in *Money Heist* (2017) using Karl Marx's (1848/1969) theory on class struggle. This study analyzes the series using a qualitative approach to uncover how the characters' backgrounds and actions reflect structural inequality within capitalist society. Key findings show that the characters experience precarity, exclusion, and lack of recognition that shape their struggles and decisions. The act of printing money at the Royal Mint is presented as a form of resistance against the state's monopoly over value creation. The study also found collective resistance forming through the exposure of state violence and manipulation. This study concludes that *Money Heist* functions as a critique of capitalism, showing how marginalization can produce resistance under oppressive systems. This study concludes that *Money Heist* functions as a critique of capitalism, showing how marginalization can produce resistance under oppressive systems.

Keywords: alienation, class struggle, precarity, resistance

INTRODUCTION

The advancements of streaming technology have revolutionized Spanish films and series, allowing films like *Belle Époque* and *All About My Mother* to reach international audiences. With institutional support playing a key role in this development that later led to the creation of the Spanish Film Academy in 1986 to professionalize the industry. These foundations allowed Spanish filmmakers and actors to showcase their culture and talent on a global stage (Triana-Toribio, 2016). As a result, the Academy became the largest association for film professionals in Spain, setting the stage for future growth.

Spanish films often reflect the nation's social and political transformations, exploring deep themes such as war trauma, family conflict, and the search for freedom. This style of storytelling became the foundation for modern television series like *La Casa de Papel*. Film production continues to engage with these complex topics including economic inequality, resistance against authority, and collective identity. For this reason, *La Casa de Papel* serves as a critical case study for understanding how Spain's historical struggles are represented in contemporary media.

The next evolution of Spain's film industry came through the rise of television and the global dominance of streaming platforms. Companies like Netflix transformed how series and films are distributed, with Spain adapting this strategy to engage with broader audiences. Netflix began as a DVD company that later shifted to a streaming service in 2007 (Iordache, Raats, & Mombaerts, 2022). Later these platforms served as the basis of how series and shows are distributed.

By the mid-2010s, streaming platforms had become major producers of original content. According to Hidalgo-Mirí et al. (2022) the rise of Spanish series began around 2016 with 2017 as the turning point with the release of *Las Chicas del Cable*. By 2020, nearly half of all Spanish streaming fiction was released that year alone, showing how quickly the industry expanded and adapted to global demand (Hidalgo-Mirí, Segarra-Saavedra, & Palomares-Sánchez, 2022). This

demonstrates how Spanish storytelling could achieve both artistic and commercial success on a global scale through digital platforms.

The massive success of *La Casa de Papel* (*Money Heist*) represents the peak of this new era in Spain's television industry. With the initial release on a local network with little attention, Netflix acquisition of the series made it reach an unprecedented international audience. The series has become a symbol of Spain's creative potential and proof of how streaming services can reshape cultural trade and audience behavior Lordache, Raats, and Mombaerts (2022). In this way, *La Casa de Papel* stands as a key example of how Spanish storytelling with themes of resistance and social inequality can achieve global relevance in the digital age.

La Casa de Papel has been selected as the subject of this due to its unique blend of genre and deep exploration of social and political issues. The series can capture complex issues such as economic inequality and power dynamics which have gained universal relevance through digital distribution. As Iordache, Raats, and Mombaerts (2022) point out, Netflix's investment in original content has transformed global cultural circulation by connecting audiences across borders. In this case, *La Casa de Papel* represents the intersection between national identity, global media expansion, and the cultural impact of streaming television in the twenty-first century.

La Casa de Papel created by Álex Pina, known for his work on shows such as *Vis a Vis* (*Locked Up*, 2015) and *El Embarcadero* (*The Pier*, 2019). After Netflix acquired and rebranded *La Casa de Papel* in late 2017, it was edited into shorter episodes and distributed globally. This acquisition marked a turning point not only for the series itself but also for the international recognition of Spanish television productions (Hidalgo-Mirí, Segarra-Saavedra, & Palomares-Sánchez, 2022). Pina's collaboration with Netflix through the establishment of his production company Vancouver Media, producing other notable series such as *Sky Rojo* (2021) and *White Lines* (2020). The success of *La Casa de Papel* elevated Pina's career and strengthened Spain's position in the global entertainment industry, as it became one of Netflix's most-watched non-English-language series (Iordache, Raats, & Mombaerts, 2022). The series stands as a defining work that reshaped global interest in Spanish storytelling.

The series features a diverse ensemble of cast that helped the series win the first International Emmy Award for Best Drama Series ("*Money Heist*" wins the *International Emmy for Best Drama*, 2018). The plot revolves around a group of eight robbers targeting the Royal Mint of Spain. Their heist is unique because instead of stealing money, they are printing their own money. Consequently, their action caused a lot of attention from the public and the government as they became some sort of symbol of resistance.

The study focuses on the series' depiction of the struggle for freedom against systemic control, interpreted through the lens of Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. The series portrays the contest of power between the robbers, who represent the marginalized, and the government, which represents the state, financial institutions, and capitalist authority. By targeting the Royal Mint, the characters expose the hypocrisy of a system where wealth is centralized and manufacture their own value as a form of protest. The study will use Karl Marx's concept of class struggle to analyze how the series represents this conflict between the oppressed and the powerful.

Economic Precarity and Social Exclusion

The characters in *Money Heist* are shaped by their conditions of insecurity and structural marginalization. The character's motivation to join the heist emerges as a survival strategy within the system that blocked their access to legitimate opportunities. This aligns with Marx's concept of the lumpenproletariat as they exemplify the class excluded from productive work and forced

to survive by other means described as the "social scum" or "passively rotting mass" (Marx & Engels, 1848/1969, p. 20). By examining the background of each character, it will reveal how systemic inequalities trap them in a cycle of poverty and exclusion.



Figure 1. Tokyo living in a rundown recreational vehicle. Money Heist, 2018, S1:E1, 01:20

Economic precarity is a condition of material insecurity shaped by structural inequality. This condition acts as a trap that reinforces the "cycle of deprivation," where poverty is not a temporary phase but a structurally maintained condition (Scott, 2006). Tokyo reflects these conditions as a fugitive, as she states, "the last day of my life as I knew it," signals that her criminalization has permanently severed her access to stable housing and employment. She lives in a rundown recreational vehicle, which represents the stratification of poverty. Her constant movement is not freedom, but is a survival strategy derived from instability where every attempt to survive deepens her exclusion. The opportunities presented to the margins suggest that the "survival strategies" available are often criminalized by the very state that fails to protect them.

This effect is also relevant in Nairobi's life; her struggle illustrates how the state actively enforces this cycle of poverty rather than alleviating it. Her criminal record for counterfeiting money at the age of 13 blocks her from legal employment that leads her to deal drugs to support her son. When there is an accident involving her son, the state responds by stripping her custody, suggesting that her economic precarity results in the total loss of her family ties. Nairobi's statement, "I had a record and no job," shows that the system ensures that when she is marked as a criminal, she has no way of redemption. (Money Heist, 2018, S1:E5, 18:00-20:00). This shows that the precarity she experienced is enforced by the government that is supposed to protect her.

Moscow's background reflects economic precarity in the long-term exploitation and devaluation of working-class labor. He represents the "invisibility of labor," where a worker's body is used and depleted by the capitalist system without adequate recognition or reward (Scott, 2006). His years of hard work in the mines left him with silicosis and no financial security, this debunked the myth that hard work guarantees social mobility. His decision to bring his son, Denver, into the heist highlights the desperation of intergenerational poverty. He realized that without extreme intervention, the precarity that he experienced would be inherited by his son, Denver. Moscow's transition from miner to robber is not a rejection of labor, but a rejection of an exploitative system that demands a worker's health in exchange for poverty wages.

Beyond economic precarity, the characters also went through social exclusion, that refers to how individuals are cut off from participation in society. Scott (2006) defines it as the denial of access to networks of belonging and citizenship. The state weaponizes relationships by turning people into a tool of police surveillance. This betrayal happens with Tokyo, in which the state uses her relationship with her mother to arrest her (Money Heist, 2018, S1:E1, 02:20-03:30). This strategy serves the connection for Tokyo to her safety net, where unconditional trust is concentrated in institutional control. As a result, Tokyo is left with "nothing to lose," a condition of total isolation labeled as a criminal by the system.



Figure 2. Tokyo's mother working with the police. *Money Heist*, 2018, S1:E1, 03:00

The Professor also faced the same issue. He experienced exclusion through bureaucratic erasure, which revealed a form of alienation. The Professor refused to renew his identification documents for twenty years which the state rendered him as nonexistent in the national database, placing him outside the society (*Money Heist*, 2018, S2:E6, 04:00-05:00). His invisibility gave him strategic advantage for the heist, with the cost of his existence highlights how institutional systems determine who is acknowledged as a social subject and who is not.

Reclaiming Power by Challenging the State's Monopoly over Printing Money

The heist functioned as a disruption of the state's control over the monopoly on value creation. By taking over the Royal Mint and printing their own currency, the group interrupts the state's exclusive power to determine what value has (*Money Heist*, 2018, S1:E2, 38:44). The act of turning the Mint as a place of production allowed them to momentarily produce their own value. By doing this, they are not stealing existing wealth, they are generating their own value and breaking the barriers that previously kept them in poverty.

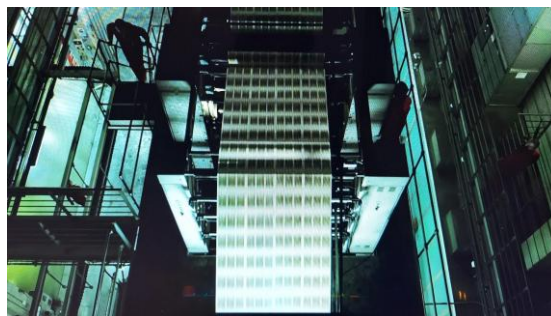


Figure 3. The act of printing money. *Money Heist*, 2018, S1:E2, 38:44

The scene portrays the disruption of the state's control over monetary production. Bell and Cleaver (2002) suggest that crises do not necessarily arise from total collapse, but from moments when systems of control are interrupted and forced to respond. The act of printing money exposes that value is a social construct maintained by authority rather than inherent worth. For the robber this moment serves as them reclaiming agency over their life, from the exploited lumpenproletariat into agents of control who dictate the terms of the economy. This disturbance dramatizes capitalism's contradictions, making its arbitrary and socially constructed nature visible.

Constructing Collective Resistance

The outcome of the heist lies in its ability to make individual criminal acts into a movement

of collective resistance. This is possible by winning the "battle of narratives" in the media and exposing the hidden violence of the state. By appearing as the oppressed the robbers carefully manage public perception that immobilize the state into a defensive position where its use of force is constrained by public opinion.

The professor understands that the heist success relies on public sympathy that acts as their shield from the state's military power. The government attempts to demonize Berlin by leaking false accusations of trafficking and exploitation, they employ "naming" strategies to dehumanize the resistance and justify lethal force (Byrd & Miri, 2019). Berlin counters the narrative in a live interview by framing them as "regular people" fighting for survival against a rigged economic system (Money Heist, 2018, S2:E4, 43:44). By humanizing their struggle and admitting their vulnerabilities, Berlin dismantles the state's fear tactics and allows the public to identify with the robbers.



Figure 4. The interview. Money Heist, 2018, S2:E4, 43:44

This moment is crucial as a turning point that shifts the public's opinion from viewing the event as terrorism to viewing it as a rebellion against inequality. Berlin uses the interview to voice their struggles and reclaim agency over their story. His defense challenges the state's moral authority and reopening space for public sympathy that proves the robbers as victims of the same system that oppresses other people. In the end, he turns the robbers from isolated criminals into figures of resistance, and the public begins to support them because they finally understand the struggle behind their actions.



Figure 5. The public's response. Money Heist, 2018, S4:E7, 43:30

When the state's hidden brutality is revealed to the masses, resistance turns to a movement. The exposure of Rio's torture reveals the state's abuse of power by using legal loopholes. Illegal torture highlights the contradiction between the state's public image as a guardian of law and its actual reliance on violence to maintain control (Money Heist, 2018, S4:E7, 35:20). As Fanon argues, exposing such violence is essential because it strips away the illusion of legitimacy that protects the ruling class (Byrd & Miri, 2019). When the truth is revealed by the Professor, the public reaction emerges from a recognition of the contradicting image the states portray and the evidence presented.

CONCLUSION

La Casa de Papel (2018) became one of the most influential series that put the Spanish filmmaking scene on the global platform. By using the theme of drama and resistance, the series managed to be a global hit by its portrayal of issues rooted in everyday social and economic realities. La Casa de Papel also presents a deep human story about people who struggle under a system that limits their opportunities and dictates their futures. Álex Pina, the director, managed to present characters who live on the edges of society, each shaped by conditions of poverty, exclusion, and instability. The series highlights issues of economic precarity, state control, and collective resistance. These trigger conflict between the authorities and the robbers, and it forces people to resist the authorities claiming their life back. Through its portrayal La Casa de Papel can be discussed through the framework of class struggle.

The analysis shows that the character's struggles came from economic precarity and social exclusion. Tokyo's life as a fugitive makes her excluded from society and she also lacks stability in her life. Nairobi's fight to regain stability after being criminalized and stripped of her son makes it hard for her to start over. Moscow represents undervalued labor, a lifetime of hard work that earned neither stability nor respect reveals how the system pushes individuals toward the margins. Their backgrounds demonstrate poverty not as a personal failure but as a structural condition that traps people in cycles of instability. The precarious situation followed with the alienation from society left them with no way of getting formal jobs and makes crime the only option for them to survive. This situation places them within the lumpenproletariat, a group excluded from formal labor and often forced to survive through informal or illegal means. Their methods of survival through informal and illegal means place them within this sub-class, aligning with Marx's description. Their stories illustrate how capitalism shapes individual lives through material deprivation, social alienation, and denial of social recognition.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the robber eventually managed to disrupt the foundation of capitalism by challenging the state's monopoly over value creation and exposing how money functions as a tool of control. Other than the characters in the series, normal people lived within this rule, and no one ever questioned it. The arrival of the robbers manages to disrupt this balance by producing their own money that also reveals the fragility of the system that has excluded them. Their act reflects Marx's argument that those who do not own the means of production are always dependent on those who do. By interrupting the country's flow of production and shaking the banking system, the heist forces the state to respond in ways that reveal its dependence on control and coercion. This situation makes the government resort to manipulation, cover-ups, and even torture to restore order. This aligns with Bell and Cleaver's idea that crises erupt when marginalized groups resist the system in ways that the authorities cannot easily absorb or ignore. The heist creates disturbance that cracks the balance of the system. The group exposes contradictions within the state's image as a protector and its willingness to violate human rights when its authority is threatened. The moment the robbers seize the Mint and print their own money the state's legitimacy is questioned and public confidence wavers. The heist becomes a turning point that reveals how fragile state power can be when confronted with organized resistance. It shows that when marginalized people take collective action, even institutions that seem stable and untouchable can be pushed into instability.

Additionally, the study shows how the heist evolves into collective resistance involving not only the robbers but also the wider public. The exposure of the state's contradiction in Berlin's interview and Rio's torture reveals how the state manipulates information to maintain authority. The public's reaction to this exposure is to side with the robbers and their struggle. The public's strikes and protests show its support on the streets by wearing Salvador Dalí masks and red jumpsuits to represent a growing awareness of inequality and frustration with state power. Their support aligns with Fanon's view that marginalized groups become politically active when they

confront the violence and injustice that shape their lives. What begins as a small act of defiance inside the Mint grows into a broader movement against systemic oppression. This shows that resistance is always present within power relations and becomes stronger when shared among those who feel excluded.

On a broader level, looking at *La Casa de Papel* shows the implications of systemic inequality in capitalist societies. The series demonstrates how institutions can hide behind legality and authority while still participating in exploitation and violence. Rio's torture, the manipulation of media narratives, and the criminalization of marginalized individuals reveal how state power often prioritizes control over justice. At the same time, the robbers struggle shows that people pushed to the margins can still reclaim agency. Their unconventional method of resistance through printing money that exposes the state's actions and uniting the people under a shared symbol is proof of their desire for dignity and freedom in a system that denies both.

La Casa de Papel shows that inequality is rooted not only in individual suffering but also in the systems that shape daily life. The robbers' actions are not simply about stealing money. They are trying to reclaim control over who they are and the futures they want. Their story makes clear that individuals on the margins can influence wider changes when their experiences are finally recognized. In the end, their stories show that resistance begins when people recognize the burdens they share, and that awareness can spark bigger changes even from those pushed to the margins.

REFERENCES

- Bell, P., & Cleaver, H. (2002). Marx's theory of crisis as a theory of class struggle [Essay by P. Bell & H. Cleaver, first published in *Research in Political Economy*, 5 (1982)]. *The Commoner*, (5), Autumn, 2002. <https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/CleaverandBell.pdf>
- Byrd, D. J., & Miri, S. J. (Eds.). (2019). *Frantz Fanon and emancipatory social theory: A view from the wretched* (Vol. 142). Brill.
- Hidalgo-Mrri, T., Segarra-Saavedra, J., & Palomares-Sánchez, P. (2022). *Towards a new TV canon: The recent history of Spanish TV fiction created for VOD (2016-2020)*. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 80, 119-133. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2022-1534>
- Lordache, C., Raats, T., & Mombaerts, S. (2022). *The Netflix Original documentary, explained: Global investment patterns in documentary films and series*. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 17(2), 151–171. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17503280.2022.2109099>
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (S. Moore, Trans.). Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>
- Money Heist wins the International Emmy for best drama*. (2018, November 20). Euronews. <https://es.euronews.com/2018/11/20/la-casa-de-papel-gana-el-emmy-internacional-al-mejor-drama>
- Pina, Á. (Creator). (2017–2021). *Money heist* [TV series]. Vancouver Media; Netflix.
- Scott, J. (2006). *Sociology: The key concepts*. Routledge.
- Triana-Toribio, N. (2016). *Spanish film cultures: The making and unmaking of Spanish cinema* (Cultural Histories of Cinema). British Film Institute / Bloomsbury Publishing.