

**CASTIGATING CORRUPTION IN THE AMERICAN POLITICAL
SPACE: A STUDY OF THEODORE DREISER'S *THE FINANCIER* AND
*THE TITAN***

Nyaa Hans Ndah

Department of English Modern Letters
Higher Teacher Training College
The University of Bamenda, Cameroon
Email: nyaahans@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The American political space depicted in Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* and *The Titan* presents a clear picture of the antagonism that prevailed in the United States between capitalism and socialism in the first half of the 20th century. We set out in this paper to portray how Dreiser problematizes corruption in American politics and how this challenge is addressed. This study is significant in that corruption is still endemic in American politics, and the reforms suggested in Dreiser's novels under study are still relevant today as far as the democratization process in the United States of America and the world is concerned. This study is based on the hypothesis that the 20th century American political space portrayed in Dreiser's *The Financier* and *The Titan* is plagued by corruption. The Marxist theoretical approach was considered suitable for our analyses in this study. The major finding of this study borders around Dreiser's commitment in the two novels to castigate the alarming rate of corruption that has destroyed party politics in the United States of America. One also finds out that Theodore Dreiser fully endorses Karl Marx's vision of a classless society as an ideal system that can eliminate the inequalities that prevail in the capitalist space. According to him, such a classless society can go a long way to reduce (to the barest minimum), corruption in American politics.

Keywords: Castigate, politics, corruption, capitalism, socialism

Introduction

Theodore Dreiser's bitterness about corruption in American politics is reflected in *The Financier* and *The Titan*. The poor living conditions he grew up in adversely affected his perception of American politics, especially about American capitalism which to him, is what has rendered Americans morally, spiritually, and socially depraved. Not only has corruption taken a heavy toll in the public space in the 20th Century American society, but the smallest unit of the society – the family is

severely fragile. Dreiser observes this disheartening trend in American politics and seeks to castigate such a disappointing trend by exposing it in his novels and also through his partisan militancy in American politics. His 1914 novel *The Financier* (the first novel of his Trilogy of Desire) vividly captures the political atmosphere of the first quarter of the 20th century in the United States of America. We therefore set out in this paper to portray how Dreiser is committed to the cause of castigating the porous American political space as a way of pushing towards its reformation.

Dreiser's bitterness with capitalism influenced him to embrace socialism which was fiercely fought against by the American government. Dreiser's sympathy with the Socialist Party which had links with the communist regime in Russia complicated issues for Dreiser because he was considered to be a security risk by the FBI¹. The FBI is said to have had a document about his militancy in the Communist Party. He was constantly monitored for security reasons. Democracy gives room for freedom of association, speech, and movement, but it is ironic that the United States of America which prides itself as the citadel of democracy persecuted citizens who sympathized with Communism. Being a leading advocate of capitalism, the U.S. government has relentlessly invested billions of dollars over the decades to fan the flames of capitalism across the world. It is evident that, with such a repressive regime, Dreiser's attitude towards American politics would be negative as depicted in *The Financier* and *The Titan*.

This study is based on the hypothetical contention that the 20th century American political space as portrayed in Dreiser's *The Financier* and *The Titan* is plagued by corruption. We also set out in this paper to attempt answers to the following research questions: How does Dreiser portray party politics in *The Financier* and *The Titan*? Why is corruption rampant in the American society depicted in both novels? How has capitalism

¹ https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Theodore_Dreiser

adversely influenced American politics? How can corruption in the American political space be mitigated?

Theoretical Framework

Marxism is the theoretical instrument that will be applied in this study to better investigate the complicated if not corrupt ways in which the game of politics is practiced in the American society depicted in Dreiser's novels. According to Marxism, literature belongs to the superstructure which is a product of the base realities. The Marxist literary approach relates the text, the society, history, culture, and the politics of the society of which the text is a product of. Attention is also focused on the life of the author because it inevitably influences his/her writing. Worthy of note is the fact that Marxist criticism focuses on class struggle, (the oppression of the proletariat by the aristocrats and bourgeoisie). Marxism is opposed to this class struggle because it leads to inequality, alienation, and the exploitation of the majority (proletarians) by the minority (bourgeoisie). The main goal of Marxists is to achieve a classless society. According to Marxists, capitalism is the ideal politico-economic system that can pave the way to a classless and peaceful society or what Karl Marx referred to as a 'workers' paradise'.

Karl Marx and Engel in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848), contended that capitalism would inevitably lead to a revolution by the working class due to the unbearable pressure it has on the oppressed workers. However, events have turned out over the decades in favour of capitalism. Capitalism has instead prevailed over socialism/communism, thus making Karl Marx's vision of a classless society an illusion. Faced with contemporary realities, Prakash Karat in his article "Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism" opines that "Marxism in the 21st century has to make a break from this straightjacket as it is an essential part of making Marxism a living theory and an accurate guide to practice" (1). This view somehow falls in line

with that of Francis Fukuyama who in his 1992 landmark publication *The End of History and the Last Man*, reiterates the fact that after the Cold War, capitalism/democracy prevailed over Communism/Socialism. There seems to be no rival to democracy (a product of capitalism) and so, mankind has no other choice but to cope with the exigencies of modern capitalism and democracy. One will therefore blend current trends of Marxist criticism with the previous, to better analyze American politics as depicted in Dreiser's novels under study.

Definition of Key Terms

The key terms to be defined and situated in the context in which they will be used in this paper are, castigate, politics, and space. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the word castigate means to criticize someone or something severely. The same dictionary also defines the word to castigate as showing disapproval of someone or something. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word "castigate" as subject to severe punishment, reproof, or criticism. The word "castigate" comes from the Latin *castigatus*, the past participle of *castigare* which mean to chasten.

Another word to be defined is the word, politics. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines politics as the art or science of government; the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy; the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government. Party politics has to do with political activities, decisions, etc., that relate to or support a particular political party. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines politics as the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed.

The term "space" has many meanings. However, for this study, the word space as defined in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* will be used to refer to the area around everything that exists, continuing to all

directions. For this study focus will be on the American society that is depicted in both novels under study.

Summarily, after defining the key terms to be used in this paper, it is good to situate or precise what we set out to do in this paper. We set out in this article to show how Dreiser criticizes or disapproves of politics in America as depicted in his *The Financier* and *The Titan*. We shall examine the subject of American politics under two major headings namely, militancy and corruption in party politics, and towards reforming American politics.

i. Militancy and Corruption in Party Politics

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines militant as “having a combative character; aggressive, especially in the service of a cause.” The word militant comes from the 15th century Latin word ‘militāre’ meaning, to serve as a soldier. However, today, the meaning of militant does not usually refer to a registered soldier: It can be anyone who subscribes to the idea of using vigorous, sometimes extreme activity to achieve an objective, usually political. In this paper, the term militancy is used to refer to the activities of political party militants in the 20th century American society as depicted in Dreiser’s *The Financier* and *The Titan*.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines corruption as the abuse of power by a public official for private gain. Corruption can include giving or accepting bribes or inappropriate gifts, double-dealing, under-the-table transactions, manipulating elections, diverting funds, laundering money, and defrauding investors. In this part of this chapter, attention is focused on political corruption. This has to do with the abuse of political power by government leaders to extract and accumulate for private enrichment, to influence the course of justice, and to use politically corrupt means to maintain their hold on power. Such practices are rampant in a capitalist system. Dreiser portrays such politically

motivated actions by public officials in his works to show the insidious extent to which capitalism has influenced American politics.

To begin with, corruption in party politics is rife in American society as reflected in Dreiser's *The Financier*. One observes that Cowperwood's capitalist-informed philosophy of 'I enjoy myself' prompts him to militate with the ruling party (that is the Republican Party in Philadelphia) to create relationships with prominent politicians of the municipality. Being an entrepreneur, he does everything possible to work in collaboration with the city treasurer in the person of George Stener. In his greed, he corrupts the treasurer by giving him money to award big contracts to him and by selling city bonds to him at a very low-interest rate. By so doing, Cowperwood can have an edge over other contractors in the city. He buys all the bonds and nothing is left for other financiers in Philadelphia. However, it is only when other influential politicians like Mollenhauer and Butler develop an interest in city bonds that the shady financial dealings of Cowperwood and the city treasurer are uncovered. The capitalist obnoxious spirit of greed is manifested in this case. Not only does one sense Stener's abuse of office for personal gain, but one equally sees Cowperwood's militancy in the Republican Party just to win lucrative business contracts in the municipality.

Another political figure who uses his overbearing political influence for personal interest is Senator Simpson. He is a wealthy and respectable politician not only in the state of Philadelphia but across the United States. It is stated in the story that the Senator "had long since graduated from State to national politics and was an interesting figure in the United States Senate in Washington, where his voice in all the conservative and moneyed councils of the nation was of great weight" (234). Considering that he occupies the top position of Senator in the Republican Party in Philadelphia, his consent is sought before any major political decision in

the state is taken. The excerpt below portrays how he uses his wealth and position to consolidate his hegemony in the Philadelphian political circle:

Simpson was a man of no little refinement artistically, of Quaker extraction, and of great wealth-breeding judgment which he used largely to satisfy his craving for political predominance. He was most liberal where money would bring him a powerful or necessary political adherent. He fairly showered offices—commissionerships, trusteeships, judgeships, political nominations, and executive positions generally—on those who did his bidding faithfully and without question. Compared with Butler and Mollenhauer he was more powerful than either, for he represented the State and the nation. When the political authorities who were trying to swing a national election were anxious to discover what the State of Pennsylvania would do, so far as the Republican Party was concerned, it was to Senator Simpson that they appealed. In the literal sense of the word, he knew. (234)

Like Cowperwood who uses every means at his disposal to win more contracts, Senator Simpson does not also hesitate to do anything to crush his political rivals. What is striking in the attitude of the senator is the influence of capitalism on his political life. Being the focal point of the Republican Party in his state, he is looked upon as the one to execute any programme in favour of his party. It is worth noting that even when it is clear that the party may lose in an election, he does everything to rig elections in his favour. His attitude is typical of that of a staunch capitalist who does anything to survive. He does not mind the moral or spiritual implications of his actions. In such a system, justice is always twisted by the executives to the detriment of the masses. The fact that he perpetuates such crimes and goes away scot-free is very telling of the insidious extent to which party politics in 20th century American society has been corrupted.

The aspect of abuse of office is also revealed in this dubious attitude of Senator Simpson. He uses his office to violate ethical principles for his gain. Since as a heavy-weight senator whose influence is felt at the level of the state and the nation, the judiciary and security agents in the United States of America remain mute to his corrupt practices. The American Constitution upholds the equality of all Americans before the law. Theodore Dreiser decries the violation of this article that is contained in the American constitution. He is worried because the likes of Cowperwood, Stener, and other common citizens are quickly sanctioned by the American judiciary; but when a senior statesman like Senator Simpson is guilty of electoral malpractices and abuse of office, no legal actions are taken against him. This portrays that American politics is put into question in *The Financier*. The assumption that all Americans are born free and equal before the law is a fallacy as revealed in the compromising actions of the judiciary concerning the activities of top politicians of the ruling party. Dreiser is not comfortable with American politics, especially with the corrupt influence of the Republican Party. This can be seen as one of the reasons why he considered joining the Communist Party which he thought would help to limit the excesses of the Republican Party which is overwhelmingly influenced by capitalism.

Michel Foucault opines that no historical event has a single cause; rather, each event is tied into a vast web of economic, social, and political factors. Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not simply as a repressive force or a tool of conspiracy but rather as a complex force that produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power. In the case of Simpson above, one can also argue that to accuse him of callously behaving the way he does to achieve his political goals is not sufficiently objective. Simpson can however be seen as a product of a society that survives on the platform of capitalism that has rather been corrupted.

The fact that he is not held responsible for the crime he commits further justifies the fact that it is not only a question of Senator Simpson who is corrupt, but also a question of a socio-political system that has been polluted by the worst kind of capitalism. Dreiser opines that such a corrupt political space should be reformed. Such a reformation would enable even the masses to be beneficiaries of the commonwealth of the nation that they are citizens of.

Furthermore, the activities of the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association also depict the unhealthy striving for supremacy that animates partisan politics in the American political space. Skelton C. Wheat is the president of this political party. He is described as “a well-known iron-manufacturer of great probity and moral rectitude... a serious and austere man—one of those solemn, self-righteous souls who see life through a peculiar veil of duty, and who, undisturbed by notable animal passions of any kind, go their way of upholding the theory of the Ten Commandments over the order of things as they are” (233). Skelton can be seen as the voice of morality in the chaotic Philadelphian political ‘wilderness’.

His party has the mission to check the excesses of the ruling Republican Party. When he discovers that one of the bigwigs of the Republican Party (the state treasurer) in complicity with Frank Cowperwood has swindled state funds, he does everything to drag the culprits to court. He mounts a stiff opposition against officials of the ruling party who do everything possible to vindicate the state treasurer. While the leading militants of the Republican Party strive to cover the matter which may jeopardize their chances of winning upcoming local elections, the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association headed by Skelton is bent on exposing the corruption in the municipality. By so doing, he hopes to win the confidence of the voters.

In-house fighting amongst militants of the Republican Party is portrayed as another dimension of partisan politics in Dreiser's *The Financier*. Since Mollenhauer, Simpson, Butler, and other Philadelphian businessmen are opposed to Frank Cowperwood because of his greed and ruthlessness in dealing with business rivals, they all conspire to make him a scapegoat with the hope of freeing their friend George W. Stener. Stener, as mentioned above is the state treasurer who is suspected to have a shady financial deal with Frank Cowperwood. Mindful of the fact that Cowperwood is also a militant of the ruling party, one observes that this does not arouse any feeling of sympathy amongst his comrades. The greed that characterizes the American capitalist society rather influences them to consider taking over control of Cowperwood's business transactions instead of rescuing him from the hands of the rival opposition party and the court that is bent on punishing him. They finally succeed in their plan. Cowperwood is jailed and due to pressure from the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association, Stener is also jailed for several years. Although Stener is jailed, the other politicians are happy because Cowperwood - 'the scapegoat they were after' has been defeated thereby allowing them to execute the many lucrative contracts he has won in Philadelphia. This unfriendly attitude of the bigwigs of the Republican Party towards their comrade is suggestive of the fact that politics in a capitalist society is animated by self-interest, blackmail, and revenge.

Moreover, electoral malpractices also plague the American political system as depicted in *The Financier*. The highly awaited elections in Philadelphia are finally conducted to the dissatisfaction of the majority of Philadelphian voters. Senator Simpson and Mollenhauer are described as having 'cleverly manipulated' the outcome of the elections to the favour of the Republican Party. It is noticed that due to ballot box stuffing, voters' apathy, and violence instigated by the Republican Party, the elections are heavily rigged. The fact that the municipal police do not do anything to stop the violence at the polls insinuates that the bigwigs of

the Republican ruling party conspire with the police to influence the outcome of the polls. The Citizens' Municipal Reform Association which ought to have won the elections continues to decry the alarming rate of electoral fraud in Philadelphia. Despite their protest and denial of the verdict of the electoral commission, the Republican Party remains in control of the municipality in particular and the United States in general.

What obtains in Philadelphian politics as reflected in *The Financier* justifies the assertion that modern capitalism is the oligarchy of the rich and influential. From a Marxist's point of view, consciousness describes a person's political sense of self. He further opines that in societies with unequal allocations of wealth and power, ideologies present these inequalities as acceptable, virtuous, and inevitable. The subordinate people come to believe in their subordination: the peasants accept the rule of the aristocracy, the factory workers accept the rule of the owners, and consumers the rule of corporations. For Marx, such a belief is false consciousness. One avers that false consciousness animates American political life as reflected in *The Financier*. Although the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association (which constitutes the majority of Philadelphians) decries the excesses of the ruling class which constitutes just a minority of the people of Philadelphia, it has little or no impact as far as the running of State affairs is concerned. The masses find themselves in a dilemma because neither do they find solace in the exploitative hands of capitalists' entrepreneurs in the factories nor do they stand a better chance to choose their political leaders. Marxist criticism focuses on class struggle, especially on the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. As part of its analysis of class struggle, it emphasizes the alienation inherent in the modes of production and exchange inherent in capitalist society. It should be noted that such alienations prevalent in capitalist communities have far-reaching ramifications in the politics of such communities as well. Not only is the economic base of America reflected in Dreiser's trilogy affected, democratic ideals have also been

compromised by the haves to the detriment of the have-nots. This indeed is the bitter reality in the American capitalist society that Dreiser castigates in the Cowperwood trilogy.

According to Karl Marx, false consciousness is when the masses believe in their helplessness and submit to the whims and caprices of the aristocrats or the ruling class. The fact that the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association frantically strives to overturn the verdict of the corrupt, if not, compromised electoral commission of Philadelphia is indicative of the overbearing dominance of the Republican Party. On the other hand, the fact that militants of the opposition party who are in the majority do not succeed in reclaiming their stolen victory is also suggestive of the weakness and helplessness in the phase of corruption and political manipulations orchestrated by a powerful but corrupt minority. Dreiser is opposed to such corrupt political manipulations and thus sets out to castigate such malpractices prevalent in the 20th century American political space.

In effect, Dreiser caricatures the use of the name and office of the mayor of Philadelphia by more influential militants of the Republican Party. Mr Jacob Borchardt is the mayor of the city of Philadelphia. He is presented more like a stooge by Dreiser because Senator Simpson and Mollenhauer use his name for selfish reasons. Not only is the letterhead of the municipality forged to implicate their business rival Cowperwood, but they go as far as sending such letters purportedly written by the mayor to the press. Their main aim is to arouse public hatred for the millionaire Frank Cowperwood whom they want to bring down at all cost. What is puzzling in this case is not only why this is done, but more importantly, the mayor's silence as far as the unauthorised use of his name and office is concerned.

The mayor's silence and helplessness to handle such a hijack of public office by prominent politicians is a reflection of the corruption prevalent

in 20th century American politics. Those holding public offices do not seem to serve the public interest; instead, they serve the interest of those who nominate them² or such offices. Senator Simpson who has an overwhelming influence in state and national politics certainly has a say in the choice of a mayor in the city of Philadelphia. This probably explains why for fear of an eventual loss of his position as mayor, Mr Jacob Borchardt chooses to remain silent when Senator Simpson and Mollenhauer tamper with his official documents and personality. Such an indifferent attitude for selfish interest is a peculiar feature of a corrupt society. In such a society, ego integrity can hardly be attained.

From the above discussion on the corruption that prevails in the American society depicted in Dreiser's novels under study, one opines that Dreiser was opposed to such an imbalance in the acquisition of wealth and the quest for power. Despite so much persecution and threats from the American government due to Dreiser's sympathy with socialism and his militancy in the Communist Party, he never relented his passion for a political system that advocates for a classless society. He underscored the need for a balance to be struck between both systems (capitalism and socialism) so that the excesses of capitalism which greatly influences American politics could be mitigated. In the next part of this paper, we shall focus on how Dreiser employs his art to suggest an eventual reformation of American politics.

ii. Towards Reforming American Politics

Although Theodore Dreiser is opposed to American politics as seen in the way he castigates it in the novels under study, he never-the-less attempts to push towards its reformation. He does this by presenting the life of an outstanding American politician and statesman whose life and

² Ego integrity is a term coined by Erik Erikson in his Ego Psychology to describe a situation or society in which moral and ethical values are maintained; and in such a society people are satisfied with their living conditions.

contribution to the development of the United States of America continue to serve as an inspiration to Americans and other people across the world. Another way by which Dreiser advocates for reforms in American politics is by proposing an alternative economic and political model of governance contrary to capitalism. This can easily be deduced from the actions of some of the characters he creates in *The Financier* and *The Titan*. The choice of the Marxist literary theory for this paper is very important because Dreiser's vision for a more stable, fair and equal American society perfectly matches with Karl Marx's vision of a classless society. The above approaches by Dreiser to reform American politics will be elaborated in this section of the paper.

To begin with, Dreiser evokes the memory of Abraham Lincoln in *The Financier*. He is referred to as the Great War president and the great commoner. Worth noting is his membership in the Republican Party. He is an extraordinary militant who incarnates republican values like patriotism, integrity, statesmanship and assiduity. He takes over command as the president of the United States of America when the nation is involved in a Civil War between the North and the South. His humanity and selflessness as opposed to Cowperwood's egoism and heartlessness is revealed in his determination to put an end to the Slave Trade in the United States of America. His militancy in the Republican Party is suggestive of the uncorrupted political agenda of the old generation of American politicians as opposed to 20th century politicians whose intentions are entirely for personal aggrandisements like the case of the corrupt Senator Simpson and Frank Cowperwood. Theodore Dreiser makes this historical allusion in *The Financier* to draw the attention of the young American generation to the fact that love and service to humanity are cardinal values that make a society develop healthily and sustainably. Presenting the example of a great politician like Abraham Lincoln and juxtaposing him with the likes of Cowperwood, Senator Simpson, Mollenhaeur and Mayor Jacob who are very corrupt, is

yet another way of telling the young American generation that one can be a politician and remain morally and spiritually upright. Dreiser seriously frowns at capitalism because, according to him, capitalism has adversely affected party politics in the United States of America.

In Dreiser's *The Titan*, one is again exposed to the slippery terrain of partisan politics in 20th century American society. After the fall of Frank Cowperwood in Philadelphia as recorded in *The Financier*, he relocates to Chicago where after winning the confidence of bigwigs of the State of Chicago, he is allowed to control some street-car companies in Chicago. Coupled with other lucrative contracts that he executes; he becomes a millionaire and the wealthiest titan in Chicago. Towards the end of the novel, Frank Cowperwood is at loggerheads with some politicians and entrepreneurs in Chicago. His business rivals in Chicago namely: Hand, Schryhart and Arneel do everything to bring him down. He wants the governor to sign his 50-year franchise bill which will grant him the exclusive right to control street-car transportation for fifty years. He also has the intention to combine all traffic lines into one general system under his control. He thinks that if there is any attempt for public ownership, it can be bought from him. However, for this bill to be signed, it must be debated upon and voted on by the aldermen of the city council.

Frank Cowperwood epitomises modern capitalism in Chicago. He has a track record of greed, and immorality and his immoral past in Philadelphia has been reported to the people of Chicago through the press. Mindful of all that he does to ruin his rivals, Chicago appears to be a place where it is the voice of the masses that is heard when major political decisions have to be taken. When Frank Cowperwood realises that all attempts to influence or convince politicians in Chicago to support him in his bid to have the exclusive rights to control the street transport network in Chicago fail, he resorts to bribery and corruption. Corruption in the American political space shows its ugly face again when

Cowperwood sets out to propose up to thirty thousand dollars for each alderman who votes in his favour. Since there are sixty-six aldermen to vote for the bill, Cowperwood sets aside one million five hundred thousand dollars to bribe the aldermen to vote in his favour. In effect, aldermen complain about poor salaries. Most of them are given just one hundred dollars per annum. For Frank to offer up to 30.000 dollars for each alderman who votes for him at the detriment of the masses can be described as a true test of integrity to the decision-makers of the city. It is mentioned in the novel that most of them, even if they were lucky, would never make half of that in a lifetime.

Despite the Mayor's call for aldermen to vote against the bill, some still rally behind Cowperwood for selfish reasons. Some contemplate taking the bribe and relocating to another city because the amount of money offered is great compared to the stipend, they are given by the city council. Cowperwood is seen by the masses not just as an enemy but as an incarnation of evil. As indicated in chapter sixty-one of *The Titan*, "certain altruists of the community were by now so aroused that in the destruction of Cowperwood, they saw their duty to God, to humanity, and democracy straight and clear" (*The Titan* 457). This is what the Mayor emphatically tells aldermen when he discovers that some of them decide to vote in support of Cowperwood contrary to the wish of the masses that they represent in the city council:

The enemy is armed and ready for action right now. They're just waiting for a peaceful moment. Don't let them find it. Be ready. Fight. I'm your mayor, and ready to do all I can, but I stand alone with a mere pitiful veto right. You help me and I'll help you. You fight for me and I'll fight for you... I tell you, gentlemen, that, while I believe there are enough honest voters in the city council to prevent the Cowperwood crowd from passing this bill over my veto, yet I don't think the matter ought to be allowed to go that far. You never can tell what these rascals will do once they see an actual cash bid of twenty or thirty thousand dollars before them. (458)

From the warning given by the mayor, it is evident that he is ready to do anything to ensure the defeat of Cowperwood. He truly fights for a just cause for the sake of the masses. It is disheartening to note that despite Cowperwood's negative reputation in Chicago, one finds greedy aldermen who still dare to vote in support of the Cowperwood 50 years-franchise bill. This can be interpreted as the negative influence of monopoly capitalism ³as described by Marxist economist, Ernest Mandel in his major work entitled *Late Capitalism*.

In the heat of the anti-Cowperwood protest, Alderman Pinski who supports Cowperwood, defends his greedy attitude by raising the fact that democracy creates an enabling environment for people to have the right to express their opinions and make their choices. Dreiser in this case can be seen as castigating American democracy which is informed by capitalism by presenting a situation wherein people justify their greed and heartlessness as being democratic. American democracy comes under attack in this case in the sense that it is not necessarily what is morally right that takes precedence but what the majority wants (even if it is wrong) that is accepted. The corruptive influence of money in American politics is overwhelming. Money is used by wealthy politicians and entrepreneurs to buy the consciences of voters like in the case of Frank Cowperwood in *The Titan*.

Another interesting twist in early 20th century American politics is revealed in *The Titan* when militancy in party politics is brought under scrutiny. It is worth noting that the antagonism between Democrats and Republicans is overshadowed by the rivalry in the ranks of pro-Cowperwoods (Capitalists) and anti-Cowperwoods (Socialists) as depicted in *The Titan*. When the crucial issue about Cowperwood's 50-year

³Among Marxian economists, monopoly capitalism is the term widely used to denote the stage of capitalism which dates from approximately the last quarter of the 19th century and reaches full maturity in the period after World War II.

franchise has to be decided in the council, one notices that it generates mixed feelings in both parties. The bill is of absolute importance in a way that party discipline⁴ is no longer respected. Aldermen are all called upon, especially by the mayor and the militants who crowd the court premises to see to it that justice is done. It is no longer whether it is a Republican or Democrat alderman who votes, but the question of who votes for or against Cowperwood. It is a question of voting not for the selfish interest of a few politicians and entrepreneurs, but for the greater good of the people of Chicago. Dreiser creates such a situation to depict not just the divergence of political ideology in the 20th century American society, but how some sensitive issues concerning the State need the influence of not only the political class but also the massive influence of trade unions or civil societies. Because politicians in most cases are influenced by the executive and influential entrepreneurs like Frank Cowperwood in a capitalist society, oligarchy will always remain the order of the day in such a society. It is such an unfair political system that Dreiser castigates in *The Titan*.

In the end, Dreiser promulgates his political ideology by presenting a crushing defeat of the pro-Cowperwoods. Due to pressure from the masses (the populace of Chicago), the aldermen who have been promised thirty thousand dollars each by Cowperwood do not dare to keep their promise. The crowd outside the city hall threatens to kill any alderman who votes in favour of Frank Cowperwood. Alderman Horanek is very angry when he realises that the mayor has stirred the crowd to come and protest against any extension of the franchise by Cowperwood. Horanek and other aldermen who support Cowperwood feel intimidated and frightened. In the end, they condemn what the mayor has done but still do not vote in favour of Cowperwood for fear of being lynched by the angry

⁴ In this case party discipline has to do with militants or officials of a political party unanimously supporting a bill or an action due to instructions from the hierarchy of that party. Such an instruction is endorsed by all the members whether they like it or not.

crowd. The masses leave the city hall rejoicing for having stood their ground against the egoistic agenda of a powerful but ruthless capitalist and his cohorts.

Dreiser presents a situation in which the working class has become politically conscious. What this means is that people have awakened to their true political role and their actual identity. For Karl Marx, this meant that the working classes would become conscious of themselves as the agents of history. This will inspire them to unite and share in the wealth of labour. This, for Marx, was their historical role and their right as opposed to merely working for wages, fighting wars on behalf of capitalists and depending on the benevolence of capitalists for their livelihood. Theodore Dreiser can be seen as having successfully set the stage for an eventual collapse of capitalism. The fact that Frank Cowperwood despite all his wealth and influence could not accomplish his egoistic plan of getting a 50-year franchise to control the street car transport network in Chicago, is suggestive of Dreiser's vision and struggle for a classless society.

Secondly, one acknowledges that without the overwhelming influence of the populace of Chicago who invaded the city hall at the time of the voting, Cowperwood would have successfully bribed a comfortable majority of the aldermen. Due to the timely intervention of the workers of the city under the influence of the Mayor, some aldermen who had already accepted the fabulous sum of 30,000 dollars each from Cowperwood had to vote against the bill. By presenting such a situation, Dreiser is advocating for the transfer of power from a few wealthy aristocrats or bourgeoisie to the masses. Not only is he granting power to the masses, but he seems to pass through the message that, social justice is the basis for harmonious living and sustainable development in modern American society.

In the closing paragraph of *The Titan*, Dreiser philosophises on both political systems, that is, capitalism and socialism. He strongly maintains that a balance must be struck between the two systems so that 'the strong must not be too strong and the weak not too weak' (472). However, a critical look at Theodore Dreiser's political life reveals that he officially joined the American Communist Party which had so much backing from Russia. He became a security risk in the United States and the FBI had a file about him because communism was fiercely fought against by the United States government before, during and after the Second World War. The fact that communism has been submerged today by capitalism even in communist strongholds like Russia, China and many satellite states, is suggestive of the fact that much still has to be done to attain the kind of workers' paradise that Karl Marx dreamt and advocated for.

Conclusion

Theodore Dreiser is indeed one of the outstanding 20th century American novelists whose activism in the American political space cannot be undermined. Disappointed with the political dispensation of the first half of the 20th century in the United States of America, he used art to vent his discontent and also to suggest a better way forward for the political growth of America. As reflected from his many works of art, capitalism for him was the unfair economic system that corrupted Americans; and he therefore sought for a better alternative to change the status quo.

Having validated the hypothesis that the 20th century American political space as portrayed in Dreiser's *The Financier* and *The Titan* is plagued by corruption through the discussions above, the following findings were also figured out: firstly, this researcher found out that Dreiser set out in the two novels under study to castigate the alarming rate of corruption that has destroyed party politics in the United States of America. Secondly, Dreiser seeks to advocate for his political ideology that is,

Socialism, to be endorsed by Americans because according to him, it will efface the imbalance and exploitation that are prevalent in capitalist economies like the United States of America. However, one also finds out that at the end of *The Titan*, Dreiser seems to propose that a balance should be struck between capitalism and socialism to have a society in which “the strong must not be too strong and the weak not too weak” (472). Lastly, with the application of the Marxist theory for this study, one finds out that Theodore Dreiser fully endorses Karl Marx’s vision of a classless society as an ideal system that can eliminate most if not all the inequalities that prevail in this capitalist space. According to him, such a classless society can go a long way to reduce to the barest minimum, the corruption that plagues the American political space.

It is worth noting that although *The Financier* and *The Titan* were published in the first quarter of the 20th century, the issues highlighted in these novels especially those bordering on American politics remain topical in the USA to date. Dreiser’s fight against corruption in American society can be seen as a contributing factor to the growth of American politics. It is due to such contributions that the United States of America can be described as one of the leading democracies in the world today. Although one still observes that so much money is still used by politicians, especially in electoral campaigns to influence the electorate, one can argue that the American electoral system has significantly evolved positively, thus making 21st century American politics worthy of emulation.

This paper is also relevant in our African political space because much of the corruption recorded in 19th and 20th century American politics as depicted in both novels under study, is still glaring in African politics today. Electoral malpractices like ballot box stuffing, bribery of voters, unfair electoral laws, military brutality, and intimidation of the masses are still rampant in most African countries today. The fact that the

masses in the *Financier* stand as one man to fight the excesses of the ruling party and corrupt leaders, is a formidable example to be emulated by Africans to overcome electoral fraud masterminded by neo-colonialists and seat-tight dictators in Africa. The triumph of the masses in *The Financier* at the end of the elections is glaring proof that, if the masses rise against the excesses of corrupt leaders here in Africa, our political system will be significantly reformed.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Dreiser, Theodore. *The Financier*. Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912.

--- *The Titan*. John Lane Company, 1914.

Secondary Sources

Ewen, Robert B. *An Introduction to Theories of Personality*. 6th edition. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003.

Guerin Wilfred, Earle Labour, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Riesman, John R. Willingham. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. MIT Press, 1971.

Mandel, Ernest. *Late Capitalism*. Verso Classics, 1999.

Fukuyama, Yoshihiro Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.

Online Sources

Cambridge Dictionary. 11 October 2022.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, [11 October 2022, ://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Cambridge+Advanced+Learner%E2%80%99s+Dictionary](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Cambridge+Advanced+Learner%E2%80%99s+Dictionary)

HARRISON, Scott. *Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism*. 16 October 2022, <[www.massline.org/Dictionary/'Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism'](http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/'Dictionary%20of%20Revolutionary%20Marxism')>

"History of Theodore Dreiser", 07 February 2024
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Theodore_Dreiser

Karat, Prakash. "Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism." 16 Oct. 2022.
<<http://cpim.org/content/marxism21st-century-alternative-neoliberal-capitalism-and-imperialism/>>

Marx, Karl. *Communist Manifesto*. 22 September 2022
<<https://www.marxists.org/marx/>>

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 12 October 2022,
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Merriam-Webster+Dictionary%2C>

Pizer, Donald. "Dreiser's Critical Reputation" Pennsylvania University, 04 September 2022, Library.

<http://sceti.library.uppen.edu./dreiser/tdcr.cm>
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 12 October 2022
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Stanford+Encyclopedia+of+Philosophy>

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 12 October 2022,
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=The+American+Heritage+Dictionary+of+the+English+Language>