

South Korea: Squid Game 2, an Allegory of Capitalism Versus Democracy

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In the nail-biting new season of Netflix's hit series *Squid Game*, players' desperate circumstances push them to make fatally risky bets on individual success even when collective action might save them.

If the debut season of the Korean Netflix series *Squid Game* [laid bare](#) the ails of modern capitalism, its highly anticipated second season reflects the challenges to organizing against it.

Initially released in 2021, *Squid Game* became an overnight global phenomenon. In the dystopian survival show, financially desperate players enter into a series of challenges adapted from Korean children's games in hopes of winning a hefty cash prize. The stakes are lethal: lose a game, and you're eliminated — permanently.

Any time one of the roughly four hundred players dies, the total prize money is raised by 100,000,000 Korean won (approximately US\$70,000). After each round, players are given the option to take a popular vote on whether or not to continue the games. If players vote to end the game before all six rounds are completed, the prize money will be divided evenly among the remaining players.

In season one, the players successfully vote to discontinue the game after just the first round. However, upon returning to the reality of debt and financial despair of their everyday lives, they decide to come back to the games. Rather than scrounging for pennies in the real world, players stake their lives for the chance to free themselves from poverty and debt. It's the crushing exploitation and unfairness of the capitalist system that brings the players back to the game.

Squid Game 2 makes even greater use of voting, dramatizing the role of elections in upholding capitalism. (If you want to avoid spoilers, stop reading now.) In the second season, protagonist Seong Gi-hun returns after winning the first season's games and the 38 billion won (approximately US\$26 million) prize money. His aim is not more wealth; he wants to find the ring of sadistic ultrarich elites running the games and end them for good. After an insurgent paramilitary strategy fails, Gi-hun's only option becomes to convince the other players to vote to stop the games.

The anonymous "gamemaster" delivers a lecture to Gi-hun on the "benevolence" of the games, which offer the poor and downtrodden "trash" of Korean society to redeem themselves through the alleged meritocracy of the gory games. Gi-hun is committed to proving him wrong. But rather than vote to save themselves, the players, racked with debt from medical bills to scam cryptocurrency investments, continue to narrowly vote to stay in the games. Lured by the ever-growing pot of prize money in an enormous glowing piggy bank, players convince themselves and each other that they can play "just one more game" before calling it quits.

The gamemaster, disguised as a player, gloats to Gi-hun that the results of the elections prove his point: the players are selfish, stupid, money-hungry, and not worth saving if they are not even willing to save themselves. In other words, the players are “voting against their own interests” and deserve whatever comes their way.

Yet far from illustrating ordinary people’s fundamental idiocy, the futile elections in *Squid Game 2* are a perfect analogy for how capitalism constrains and compels the actions of the working class.

In [The Class Matrix](#), Marxist sociologist Vivek Chibber [argues](#) that when a capitalist society lacks credible forms of working-class organization, workers’ pursuit of individual self-interest is a rational decision. Without labor unions and workers’ parties, the costs of taking collective action against the capitalist class become unreasonably high. Only when working-class organization exists do we see a systemic, collective challenge to capitalism.

Chibber is arguing here against the ideas of false consciousness and cultural hegemony. It’s not that workers are confused (the basic premise of Friedrich Engels’s notion of false consciousness), but rather that they are making rational decisions out of their own material interest by taking individualistic action when there is no existing form of organization that would make collective action desirable or even possible.

This is a materialist retelling of a story often dominated by culture, even among Marxist thinkers. For Antonio Gramsci, on a popular reading of his work, the capitalist class uses its dominant position to shape the ideas, beliefs, and values of a society to support capitalism — a process called cultural hegemony, which again suggests that workers have been duped. But for Chibber, it’s actually the material structure of our society that primarily determines what workers do, not their ideas, whether right or wrong. In [Chibber’s words](#), “Workers accept the system not because they find it legitimate or desirable but because they see no other choice.” Capitalism “remains stable because the ‘dull compulsion of economic relations’ keeps bringing workers back to their jobs every day, whether or not they’re happy, whether or not they’re satisfied.”

In *Squid Game 2*, we see this happening in real time as the players repeatedly vote to continue the games, even after seeing others die right before their eyes. Through the eerie speakers, the anonymous announcer urges players to respect the legitimacy of the “free and fair” elections, while threatening to punish players like Gi-hun for attempting to convince other players to quit. All the while, armed guards stand before the players in a line.

The players are not merely deluded. They’re not thinking irrationally. Their choice in the game is made in the context of a *lack of choice* over their economic conditions outside the game. They’re not “voting against their own interests,” but rather soberly assessing their bleak prospects for resistance and betting on individual success instead. Gi-hun’s task — the task of politics — is to make collective action a viable, rational choice.

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