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The Silent Weight of Class: Hegemony and False Consciousness in *Common Courtesy (Nezaket)*

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WHAT IS COURTESY?
Courtesy is more than politeness. Rooted in the Old French *courtoisie*, originally denoting the disciplined behavior expected in royal courts, it has long functioned as a tool of social regulation. As Norbert Elias (1969) suggests, such codes of conduct internalized hierarchies by rendering domination respectable, even virtuous. In this sense, courtesy operates not only as etiquette but as ideology: a form of soft power that legitimizes authority while concealing inequality. In this film, *Common Courtesy*, this historical logic finds a contemporary echo. Beneath its modest portrayal of a seemingly benign workplace lies a quiet reproduction of class power. The relationship between a small appliance store owner and his ailing employee Halil is presented as humane, even touching—but its deeper significance is class-based. Here, courtesy itself becomes the protagonist: the invisible agent through which structural domination is naturalized, embodied, and moralized.

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The invisibility of class relations often takes shape behind the veil of everyday politeness. *Common Courtesy* aims to partially render visible the structural domination operating beneath this veil. The film presents the relationship between an appliance store owner and his employee Halil, who suffers from a herniated disc, as a simple, ordinary, even "humane" story. Yet, it in fact represents one of the most refined forms of class conflict. Halil is a laborer whose health has deteriorated due to a heavy workload. Although he is offered a job with better conditions elsewhere, he cannot leave his current position. The employer, fully aware of this situation, takes no action. This indifference does not stem from a personal moral failure, but from the nature of his structural position—he is, after all, the employer.

Such a relationship is not limited to economic exploitation; it is the product of a regime of consent that also operates at cultural and ideological levels. The continuity of dominance is ensured not solely through direct coercive mechanisms, but through the production of symbolic structures, moral norms, and emotional codes embedded in everyday life (Lears 1985). Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides an illuminating framework in this regard: the ruling class universalizes its own interests, not only through force but by shaping cultural meaning. Subaltern classes, in turn, often internalize and reproduce values that contradict their own material interests. Halil's loyalty to his employer emerges from such values—modesty, fidelity, silence—which serve to legitimize his class position. However, this internalization leads him into a passivity that ultimately conflicts with his own interests. The tension between his intuitive sense of justice and his everyday submission corresponds directly to what Gramsci describes as "contradictory consciousness" —a condition in which the worker, while intuitively perceiving injustice through lived experience, continues to think within the framework of dominant ideology (Lears 1985, 570).

This regime of consent also involves the ideological naturalization of domination. While Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as a structure sustained through contradictions within consciousness, McCarney's notion of false consciousness refers to the disappearance of these contradictions—the moment when the structure becomes unquestionable. The individual does not simply fail to recognize that the social order works against them; rather, they come to perceive it as the natural order of things (McCarney 2005). Halil's rejection of a job offer with better conditions cannot be explained merely through emotional loyalty. His inaction stems from the internalization of values taught by the dominant

structure—loyalty, gratitude, sacrifice—which are not just cultural norms but perceived moral truths. The relationship he builds with his employer is therefore not coded economically but morally. In this moral framework, exploitation becomes both invisible and legitimate.

The employer figure in the film does not represent a classical capitalist type, but rather a modern form of neo-feudal authority. Instead of enforcing absolute domination, he cultivates an emotional, even familial, bond with the employee. The commonly encountered "we are a family" discourse in contemporary workplaces functions as an ideological veil; it obscures the structural position of the worker and encourages identification with roles such as the temporarily unsuccessful entrepreneur or the loyal family member. This kind of rhetoric, which obstructs the development of class consciousness and conceals capital-labor antagonism, has been well documented (Day 2020). Halil's employer does not impose direct pressure; instead, he appears to care about Halil's well-being. These gestures reflect a relationship in which authority is sustained not only materially but also emotionally. The employer reinforces his moral authority not through institutional control but through a sense of implicit obligation. Power, in this context, manifests not through overt discipline but through an internalized sense of debt; loyalty, devotion, and gratitude become key ideological tools for preserving class hierarchies.

Halil's sense of moral debt is not a matter of personal disposition; it is grounded in the internalized codes of his class culture. Ruby Payne's work on class-based hidden rules offers a valuable framework for understanding such internalizations. In low-income groups, time is predominantly experienced in the immediacy of the present; decisions are oriented around survival and the continuity of interpersonal relationships rather than long-term planning. Language tends to emphasize emotional and relational connections, and resistance to authority is rare, as it conflicts with survival strategies (Payne 1996). Halil's decision to remain loyal at the expense of his own health is a clear example of this invisible set of norms. The cultural logic of his class rewards relational behavior that subordinates individual interests, thus producing a silent consent to structural inequality.

The employer interprets Halil's loyalty as irreplaceable dedication, but in reality, this loyalty is a manifestation of structural powerlessness. Jean Anyon's concept of the "hidden curriculum" provides a useful analytical lens here. Her observations on class-based education practices reveal that working-class children are socialized from an early age

into specific cognitive and behavioral patterns. They are expected to be obedient and compliant; the knowledge they receive is typically abstract, decontextualized, and removed from application. This pedagogical model serves to prepare them for a labor market in which compliance is valued over critical thinking (Anyon 1980). The long-term impact of such an education system is evident in Halil's case: a disposition that accepts authority without question and naturalizes structural inequality.

Halil's class position shapes not only his social relations, but also his emotional dispositions, action capacities, and even bodily experience. His herniated disc is not merely a medical issue; it is a corporeal symptom of the systemic exploitation of labor, a wound inscribed by class. This condition evokes what has been termed a "structure of feeling" —a historically embedded, pre-discursive affective formation that, while difficult to articulate, is powerfully felt in the fabric of everyday life. Halil's silence, his inability to articulate himself, and the emotional disconnection in his interactions with his employer all signify a suppressed class-based anger, or an unspoken form of resistance.

The employer's politeness is also far from innocent. Ideological hegemony entails not only the forceful imposition of dominant values but also their transmission through seemingly benevolent, natural, and morally sanctioned forms. Relationships that ultimately undermine the subordinate party's interests are often legitimized through a discourse of kindness or paternalistic care (SAGE 2014). The employer does not directly harm Halil; rather, he sustains—quietly and politely—the very structure that produces harm. This mode of domination operates not through coercion, but through silence, emotional detachment, and the language of care.

Yet the tragedy of *Common Courtesy* lies precisely in the contradiction between subjective intentions and objective conditions. Both Halil and his employer may appear well-meaning, even kind—and in certain gestures, they genuinely are. But the film does not portray a world of moral equivalence; rather, it depicts individuals shaped by vastly unequal positions within a structure that disciplines even their decency. This is not merely a story of exploitation masked by politeness. It is a portrayal of how individuals—especially those in subordinate positions—are compelled to navigate structural pressures that define, constrain, and ultimately instrumentalize their actions. While the employer appears courteous, his inaction is not the result of helplessness, but of a quiet compliance with the logic of domination. The social order

does not impose itself through force alone, but through the gradual internalization of norms that make domination appear natural—even moral. *"Courtesy"* thus reveals how power often functions most effectively when it disguises itself as care. The figures in the film are not passive puppets of ideology, but subjects entangled in contradictory demands: they act, they choose, they mean well—but always on terrain not of their own making. This is the film's tragic core: even in a world where everyone seems polite and well-intentioned, someone still ends up in the hospital.

In conclusion, *Common Courtesy* illustrates how class relations are not only reproduced in the economic sphere but also in the emotional, moral, and cultural layers of everyday life. While the film presents itself as a modest, humane portrayal of a quiet workplace, it subtly interrogates the structural tensions beneath this surface. Halil's "politeness" is revealed to be not an individual virtue, but an ideological product of his class position; his loyalty, silence, and self-sacrifice are not acts of generosity, but the embodied consequences of a historically situated mode of domination. In this sense, *Common Courtesy* is not merely the story of a worker—it is a cinematic narrative of class discourse, internalized consent, and embodied inequality.

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MOVIE
The *Common Courtesy* short film can be viewed at the following address:
https://vimeo.com/997054453/4b9881331f
password: 619182