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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE IN GAME OF THRONES: EXPLORING HOW GAME OF THRONES RESISTS NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY

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by

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ABSTRACT

Game of Thrones has become one of the most popular television series of all time. Concerned with the way mainstream pop culture can been used to promote and uphold neoliberal ideology, this paper will be exploring the degrees in which neoliberalism informs or is resisted by *Game of Thrones'* narrative. The purpose of this study is to discover the degrees in which the medium of narrative driven television can be used to resist dominant ideology. As such, I conduct a content analysis to explore the latent content of *Game of Thrones'* narrative to discover the type of messaging that could be taken up by its large audience. I focus primarily on criticisms of neoliberalism, as well as neoliberal discourse to form the basis of my analysis. However, my focus surrounds conversations on power, wealth, and class within the series, rather than every aspect that neoliberalism may inform. Dialogue and key events are examined as they draw parallels from neoliberal society at large. This paper finds that *Game of Thrones* is capable of criticizing neoliberalism but is unable to provide an alternative to the world it is criticizing. The ending of *Game of Thrones,* where a solution or alternative to neoliberalism is offered, is in many ways a contradiction to the very criticisms it made. From here, it is decided that while *Game of Thrones'* narrative does not fit the mold of neoliberal discourse, as its ability to be taken up by its audience is weakened by its ending.

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Introduction

In 2011, the series *Game of Thrones* became one of the most popular television series of all time. Over the course of its 8 seasons *Game of Thrones* could draw 10 million viewers to HBO alone, not including the millions more who watched the show illegally (Watson, 2019). The series tells the story of a medieval country's civil war and the battle for the "Iron Throne." Millions immediately fell in love with this series, filled with violence, deceit, politics, love, magic and dragons. However, this paper is more interested in the story being told below the surface.

Influenced by the works of Hall (2016), I want to explore the ideological underpinnings of *Game of Thrones'* narrative. Mainstream pop culture, of which *Game of Thrones* is a part, has often been a vessel for dominant ideology. For the sake of this paper I will say that the dominant ideology is neoliberalism. As a student of social justice, I believe that neoliberalism has influenced our political, economic, and cultural structures in a negative way. As such, I am interested in ways that mainstream popular culture is used to reinforce and promote neoliberal ideology. That being said, I am unwilling to condemn *Game of Thrones* to such definitions before a proper analysis of its narrative, as I am interested in the possibility for mainstream pop culture to resist dominant ideology. For this paper I will be focusing on neoliberal ideology in relation to power, wealth, and class, as they have been directly influenced by neoliberalism. While neoliberalism encompasses a lot more than these three aspects, considering the length of this paper I will only be focusing on them. In following, my research question is as follows: How might the narrative of *Game of Thrones* as an element of mainstream pop culture resist dominant ideologies about power and wealth/class?

An interest of this paper is to discover whether resistant messaging can exist within the mainstream. It is the position of paper that mainstream pop culture has been too cautious when it came to its approach of social issues, that is if they even approached them at all. Worse than that, mainstream pop culture has become infected with neoliberalism, demonstrated by their promotion of individualism and criticism of state institutions (Mazierska and Kristensen, 2017). A goal of this paper is to discover an outlier to this, a wolf in sheep clothing, or probably more appropriately a sheep in wolf clothing. *Game of Thrones* being the focus of this research, could offer an example of how resistance can survive or slip through the cracks of the mainstream, perhaps inspiring others to do the same.

As the focus of this paper is narrative, other elements of this series cannot be spoken towards. Visuals for example, may have aided to the answering of this research question, however, for the sake of the size of this project it will not be a part of this analysis. It is the stance of this paper that narrative will be enough, as narrative will ultimately point towards ideology (Toolan, 2001). Conversations between characters, which characters strive and which characters struggle, which characters live which characters die, and which character will win the 'Game of Thrones' will demonstrate the ideology it supports, more specifically, how the narrative justifies these characters fates. For example, if a character suffers, does the narrative point towards his unwillingness to work hard and claim that this character has no one to blame but themselves? The narrative probably supports a neoliberal ideology. On the other hand, should the narrative instead demonstrate the social or economic circumstances that inhibit this character to strive, it might resist such an ideology. The way the narrative discusses the

topics of power, wealth, and class within the lens of neoliberalism, will lead to the answering of this research question.

In this same vein, this paper will be conducting a content analysis and as such will be speaking towards latent content. As this series takes place in a medieval fantasy it will not explicitly speak towards neoliberalism, therefore the goal of this analysis is to demonstrate how it does so implicitly. More specifically, it will be drawing comparisons between conversations about power, wealth and class in this series, to such conversations in our reality. Using neoliberal discourse with criticism of such discourse, this paper will use those discussions to gage *Game of Thrones*' resistance to neoliberalism. From there, this paper will discuss how the of *Game of Thrones'* narrative may benefit the pursuit of social justice or impede it.

Literature review

Defining Neoliberalism and Forms of Resistance to Dominant Neoliberal Ideologies

Neoliberalism, defined by Harvey (2005), is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that the well-being of humans can be advanced through private property rights, free markets, and free trade (p. 2). While the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework that would push forward such practices, neoliberalism favours deregulation, privatization and the withdrawal of the state from most areas of social provision. Almost all states, democracies and welfare states, have embraced neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has crept into all corners of society and as such

has become the hegemonic mode of discourse. However, neoliberalism is not free from criticisms. What is of concern in this paper is neoliberal perspectives on the relationship between power, class, and wealth, as well as their respective criticisms and resistance.

To examine the potential of *Game of Thrones* to resist dominant forms of ideology, we must first understand what it means to resist dominant ideologies. Antonio Gramsci (1999) states in his *Philosophy of Praxis*, "philosophical activity is not to be conceived solely as the 'individual' elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also and above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular 'mentality' and to diffuse the philosophical innovations which will demonstrate themselves to be 'historically true' to the extent that they become concretely" (p. 663). Gramsci argued that his *Philosophy of Praxis* must be a criticism of the idea of 'common sense' (p. 637). He argued that 'common sense,' as a way of organizing the world, was given to the 'simple' masses by an 'elite' of intellectuals (Gramsci, p. 643). As Hall (2016) states, "It is sometimes through coercive measures, sometimes through educative and regulative measures, and most frequently through a combination of these, that the State attempts to mobilize cultural and ideological consent" (p.166). When Gramsci speaks about resisting a dominant ideology or the dominant way of organizing the world or politics, he describes resistance in the following terms:

> but widespread, mass ideology must be distinguished from the scientific works and the great philosophical syntheses which are its real cornerstones. It is the latter which must be overcome, either negatively, by demonstrating that they are without foundation, or positively, by opposing to them philosophical syntheses of greater importance and significance (p. 760).

Following Gramsci, for *Game of Thrones* to resist dominant ideology, it must either demonstrate that 'common sense' is without foundation, or that there are better

alternatives to the dominant form of organizing the world. Here it should be noted that Gramsci (1999) was not referring to pop culture, or even narrative when it came to resistance. Gramsci does not speak of either; rather, he believes that the role of resistance should be given to those intellectuals that had been organically of the 'simple' masses, that to resist the dominant way of organizing the world is the purpose of philosophy (p. 636). This literature review does not plan to disprove or contradict Gramsci's thoughts, but rather to expand on the possibilities of resisting the dominant ideologies that organize the world. While the research question that guides this paper uses *Game of Thrones* as a case study, its goal is to understand whether or not narratives and pop culture have a role in resistance. That role will be explored further.

I will first discuss the question of power, or where power truly lies. A neoliberal perspective would say that power rests within individuals and their capacity to change the world through democracy. Jodi Dean (2009) states that democracy is, "the ideological message of communicative capitalism" or neoliberalism (p. 76). The truth is however that, "Real existing constitutional democracies privilege the wealthy. As they install, extend, and protect neoliberal capitalism, they exclude, exploit, and oppress the poor, all the while promising that everybody wins" (Dean, 2009, p. 76). So, a neoliberal perspective claims that power is evenly distributed amongst individuals, while a resistant perspective would claim that power is held by a privileged minority.

Like a neoliberal position on power, a neoliberal perspective would claim that individuals are all equal in their capacities to obtain wealth and by consequence able to transcend class lines. However, as Dumenil and Levy (2013) state, neoliberalism, "expresses the strategy of the capitalist classes in alliance with upper management,

specifically financial managers, intending to strengthen their hegemony and to expand it globally...this strategy appeared successful, based on its own objectives, the income and wealth of a privileged minority, and the dominance of a country" (p. 1). A resistant perspective to neoliberalism in relation to wealth/class would support that neoliberalism strengthens the ability of a privileged class to obtain wealth, rather than believing that neoliberalism affords the same ability to all individuals equally.

Narrative, pop culture, and resistance

Hall (1973) argues that audiences respond to or decode messages from three possible positions. While this paper is not focused on audience responses to *Game of Thrones*, it does examine the show's narrative in order to understand the ideological messages that audiences are in a position to decode. The first position he defines as the "dominant or hegemonic code," where the audience accepts the message completely (p. 16). The second position is the "negotiated code," a position in which the audience "acknowledges the hegemonic definitions" while operating "with exceptions to the rule" (p. 17). The third position is the "oppositional code." Here, an audience decodes the messages "in a globally contrary way" (p.18). Rather than conduct research on the possible decodings the audience experienced, I undertake an academic approach in analyzing what Hall would call connotative meanings. By analyzing these connotative meanings this research paper hopes to discover whether or not the audience could interpret the narrative of *Game of Thrones* as resistance or supportive of the dominant ideology.

Hall (2016) explains that ideas exist in action and that action is inserted into practices, which are governed by rituals within the existence of an ideological apparatus. Narratives and pop culture as practices cannot be separated from ideology. Therefore, they can serve as vessels that carry dominant forms of ideologies. In this case, "Those people who work in the media are producing, reproducing, and transforming the field of ideological representation itself" (Hall, 2016, p. 141). These people stand in a different relationship to ideology from those who produce and reproduce material commodities. Hall explains that the bourgeoisie in its contemporary form understands that it must operate within cultural, intellectual, and moral spaces, not only the political realm. That victory for the dominant/privileged class or bourgeoisie comes when they command the balance of political, social and ideological forces at each point in the social formation. Hall understands that the dominant class will, and has, used narrative in pop culture to reinforce their perspectives and ideologies.

Hillard (2009) explores the many ways that Hollywood has created 'political films' that dealt with topics such as war, anti-Semitism, prison and justice, labour, poverty, racism, politics, homophobia, technology, and sexism. However, Hilliard comes to the conclusion, "that Hollywood remains conservative and unwilling to go out on a limb to make a provocative and timely film that would generate true social action." (p. xi) All this to say that often, Hollywood productions have been vessels for dominant ideologies and perspectives. *Game of Thrones* may be 'political,' in the sense that it deals with some of the social justice issues that Hilliard (2009) outlines but it is entirely possible that it does not explore these issues in a provocative or timely manner. This is due to the fact that "There remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither

univocal nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of dominance' in a culture is an absolutely crucial point. We may say, then, that the different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into connotative domains of dominant or preferred meanings" (Hall, 1973, p.13). In this sense, pop culture, at least from Hollywood, can be seen as an agent for the dominant ideology of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, as Gitlin (1979) explains, the hegemonic system is not cut-and-dried or definitive. Because of the way in which it functions, i.e., through advertising income in the case of television, television shows may buy into a lot of possible ideologies to attract audiences. In this sense, "to put it another way: major social conflicts are transported into the cultural system, where the hegemonic process frames them, form and content both, into compatibility with dominant systems of meaning" (Gitlin, 1979, p. 264). It should be noted that in the case of *Game of Thrones* that advertisements are replaced with a subscription-based service. However, *Game of Thrones* can not pay for their production cost with subscription fees alone and must rely on other sources of income from investors and brand deals. The same argument could be made here as it is entirely possible that frustrations with the neoliberal system were adopted and moulded to fit dominant systems of meaning, and as such *Game of Thrones* can address these frustrations without challenging the dominant systems of meaning. In a way, the system domesticates critique by absorbing it. Nevertheless, Gitlin acknowledges that there will be friction in adopting these alternative or oppositional points. Because the "hegemonic ideology of liberal capitalist society is deeply and essentially conflicted in a number of ways" (p. 264).

As Hall (2016) states, "The field of the ideological has its own mechanisms; it is a "relatively autonomous" field of constitution, regulation and social struggle" (p. 157). Hall would believe that narrative in pop culture is not free or independent of determinations, but they are not reducible to the simple determinacy of other social formations that have been reduced to black and white. Hall believes that while different cultural forms do not make any guarantees, they do contain real possibilities, as he states, "sometimes the forms people appropriate may not look like they have any potential for struggle, resistance, negotiation, or even survival, but nevertheless generate them for people who are able to discover in them a language within which alternative subjective possibilities are made available" (p. 205). Narrative in pop culture is at the end of the day a vessel for ideologies. There is nothing inherent or absolute about what that ideology will be. While it has been established traditionally that pop culture has been a tool of the dominant ideology, there is evidence to support that it has and can be used for resistant purposes.

The story that *Game of Thrones* is telling cannot be separated from those who created it; the narrator's beliefs and ideology cannot be separated from the work that they are creating (Toolan, 2001). This does not mean that the narrative was intentionally created to prop up their beliefs and ideological perspectives, rather that it is difficult to exclude them. Regardless of my findings, my conclusions may have never been the intention of *Game of Thrones* creators, even if their beliefs and ideologies are apparent. In this same vein comes the idea of learning from narratives, placing the purpose of narratives as creating an experience from which the audience can learn. Whether intentional or not, a character resolving a crisis or problem creates the opportunity for

the audience to learn. How the audience interprets this lesson is never certain, as Hall would argue, yet the narrator's beliefs and ideology will affect how this lesson might take shape.

I believe that when narratives offer lessons, such narratives can be used to invoke change. Beach (2010) argues that narratives allow people to make sense of the past, present and, by extrapolating from the themes of a narrative, what one could possibly expect from the future. Beach proposes that the ability of narratives to make forecasts about the future, can, in fact, lead to change. As Beach explains, "Decisions arise when you compare an extrapolated forecast with your desired future. You are willing to tolerate some discrepancy between the two, but if it is too large, you conclude that the forecasted future is undesirable and set about constructing a plan of action to change it" (p. 182). While Beach acknowledges that such forecasted futures can be complicated and require a large amount of time and deliberation to change them, narrative can lead to such a task by showing people what they want from themselves, society and the world. Therefore, narrative can lead to a resistance of perspective. What needs to be acknowledged, which is lacking from Beach's (2010) argument, is that narrative could be used to evoke change that benefits the dominant ideology, which Toohan (2001) describes as an "unreliable narration" (p. 3) where narrative is abused. However, there is nothing inherent about the nature of narratives in pop culture.

A great example of a narrative in popular culture that was able to resist dominant ideologies at the time was *Star Trek*. Rhodes (2017) explains that *Star Trek's* place within and beyond popular culture has allowed it to engage with critical social and political issues. Rhodes explains that *Star Trek* was able to approach, "modern,

historical, and futuristic ideas of race, labour, gender, nature, landscape, and place" (p. 30). Because of this, *Star Trek* is an example of mainstream pop culture that was able to resist dominant ideologies and perspectives. As Rhodes concludes:

> In this way, both science fiction and memory serve as powerful agents for social justice and shapers of place, space, narrative, and landscape. These places, spaces, narratives, and landscapes of Star Trek, while often imagined, are embedded with meaning which have continually been written, re-written, and contested to address alternate pasts, presents, and futures. (p. 37)

While mainstream pop culture has traditionally been used to deliver the ideologies and perspectives of the dominant class, *Star Trek* demonstrates that there are exceptions to the rule. This defiance of the norm at the minimum establishes that pop culture is capable of being resistant to dominant forms of ideologies. What remains to be seen is whether or not *Game of Thrones* falls into the same category of pop culture of *Star Trek*, or if it is just another example of the traditional role pop culture has played for the dominant ideology.

Game of Thrones and resistance

Before speaking directly about *Game of Thrones*, this literature review must justify why studying *Game of Thrones* matters. *Game of Thrones* was immensely popular and reached one of the largest audiences in the history of television (Watson 2019). I believe due to its wide-ranging audience studying its narrative is of extreme importance. If the literature review is to be believed, *Game of Thrones* could challenge perspectives, and with an audience of this size I believe that its narrative is worth studying. For better or for worse, *Game of Thrones* may have a cultural impact that this paper cannot predict. While this research project cannot speak towards the effects that

Game of Thrones will have, it can reflect upon the show's types of messaging, and offer an assessment of whether it supports a dominant perspective or ideology or resists it. While narratives and other popular cultural forms are understood as having the capacity to be resistant, it is difficult for such resistance to exist within the mainstream. In the case that *Game of Thrones* offers avenues of resistance, it would represent an aberration of sorts, and its success should be examined. Secondly, should it be found that *Game of Thrones* offers little resistance, and even supports dominant ideologies or perspectives, it is of equal significance to understand how its narrative forms may be problematic or even dangerous for its audience.

From the extant literature it would seem that *Game of Thrones* has been received similarly in the way that *Star Trek* was, with some exceptions of course. As Chau and Vanderwees (2019) state:

> Issues such as race, gender, and class are explored in the Seven Kingdoms, and within the relatively loose generic parameters of "fantasy," unconventional solutions emerge. If Game of Thrones functions as a reflection of our current social, cultural, and political milieu, the notion of fantasy as pure escapism begins to fall apart. Instead, Game of Thrones not only provides a mechanism for wish fulfilment, but it perhaps also functions as a text for thinking about resistance or political dissensus, or for imagining political alternatives. (p. 3)

For example, Milkoreit (2019) discovered that the narrative of *Game of Thrones* has very strong parallels to climate change politics of the real world. Furthermore, he argues that there is the potential for political opponents to make use of the show's narrative to advance different political agendas. In this case, it is seen that *Game of Thrones* could be used "for the purpose of political mobilization in favour of climate change action" (Mikoreit, 2019, p. 36). Dey and Mondal (2018) outline the same parallel to climate change politics, explaining how the 'White Walkers' of *Game of Thrones* are an

elaborate metaphor for the climate change crisis. They explain this by stating, "If the agents of climate change have been mercilessly taking a toll on the lives of the living folks of Westeros" can be parallel to the "death toll on account of storm surge induced by climate change in the Bengal Delta alone" (p. 78). *Game of Thrones*, in this case, is resistant to the discourse surrounding climate change denial. Arguably, the 'White Walkers' from *Game of Thrones* could be used to challenge the dominant ideology that informs this discourse. This example supports Liza Gross's (2018) point of view: "we hope that everyone who values unbiased scientific evidence thinks about ways to harness storytelling to help people grasp this complex but very real threat to our planet. We need to reclaim the storyline before it's too late" (p. 3).

What can be seen here is that there seems to be a demand for critical storytelling, or what this paper would define as a narrative in pop culture, to challenge dominant ideologies because, as Gross (2018) states, "Scholars and journalists have since documented similar duplicitous disinformation campaigns waged by the chemical and fossil fuel industries" (p. 3). Gross calls upon further forms of narrative in pop culture to challenge the discourse surrounding climate change denial, which *Game of Thrones* has stepped up to do. However, this is not the only social issue that *Game of Thrones* has criticized.

Priscilla Walton (2019), for example, explores the ways in which *Game of Thrones* conveys the complexities of various systems of governance. As Walton (2019) explains, "Hence, ranging from near-feudal states, through raison d'état, to imperialism and, here, democracy, Martin includes an astounding number of government modalities, exposing readers and viewers to the strengths and weaknesses of the various

governances" (p. 112). *Game of Thrones*, by demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of various governances, allows its audience to be critical of these forms of governance, which could, in theory, lead to resistance to them. However, as Watson (2019) states, "while Game of Thrones has been dismissed as 'trash,' this article has, in fact, only scratched the surface of its baroque machinations" (p. 112). There is a lot more to be discovered about *Game of Thrones*, and not specifically in how it conveys governance.

It is only fair to recognize that *Game of Thrones* is not without its criticisms. Mat Hardy (2019) explores the ways *Game of Thrones* reinforces existing preoccupations of our actual world. The example Hardy focuses on is the representation of Eastern lands and cultures: "This is because even a ground-breaking fantasy series like Game of Thrones still relies on our in-built cultural beliefs about the East—convictions that have been reinforced by centuries of repetition in all forms of art and formed from the very basis of our presumed cultural superiority" (p. 42). Given that the question that guides this study deals specifically with representations of power and class/wealth, this analysis does not address Hardy's critique of *Game of Throne*s' Orientalist representations. While it has yet to be accessed whether or not *Game of Thrones* supports the dominant ideology in regard to power and class/wealth, it is, at least in the eyes of Hardy, supporting the dominant ideology with its representations of the East.

Diana Marques (2019) has studied the portrayal of women who are strong and violent within *Game of Thrones*. According to Marques: "Even though these are women occupying positions of power, it is obvious that power is still connected to men and to a

patriarchal structure that they cannot seem to discard completely. However, the paradigm of power is changing. It seems that women are taking over Westeros" (p. 62). What *Game of Thrones* explores is the ability, of mainly women, to cross gender boundaries. However, when these women gain power, they do so in a way that is connected to male qualities. What Marques hints at, and what this study will explore, are the ways in which *Game of Thrones* is capable of criticizing the dominant systems and patriarchal structures responsible for creating these boundaries in the first place. However, it should be noted that in this study I do not directly address representations of sex, gender, or sexuality. While these themes may arise within the discussions of power and wealth/class, a holistic examination of the representation of sex/gender/sexuality will not be possible within the course of this study.

This research paper aims to extend the existing literature by questioning whether *Game of Thrones* furthers resistance to dominant positions beyond the topics discussed thus far. If *Game of Thrones* is demonstrably resistant to the dominant ideology, it could be assumed that *Game of Thrones* could positively shift attitudes and social norms and bring about change. Moreover, *Game of Thrones* could offer an example of how to weave resistant elements into a narrative that could be used by others hoping to do the same. However, should *Game of Thrones* reveal itself to maintain or extend dominant positions, then it could be assumed that the effects of the show will negatively affect the pursuit of social justice. Therefore, this paper will extend the literature by determining the degree to which neoliberalism informs, or does not inform, the narrative of *Game of Thrones*.

Methodology

This section reviews the methods used to respond to the core research question: How might the narrative of *Game of Thrones* as an element of mainstream pop culture resist dominant ideologies about power and wealth/class. My goal is to examine whether or not the narrative of the entire series is written from the perspective of neoliberalism. I undertake an analysis of the key narrative elements related to themes of power and class/wealth. Through a content analysis, I review quotes and specific narrative events from the series to determine their relevance to the topic of power or wealth/class. To this end, I review every episode of *Game of Thrones*. Once these elements have been assessed, my discussion chapter will consider the ideological discursive framework of the series.

Critical Research Paradigm

I believe it is most appropriate to adopt a *critical research paradigm* as defined by Reid, Greaves and Kirby (2017). As they explain, "The critical paradigm examines societal structures and power relations and how they play a role in promoting inequalities and disenabling people while promoting reflection and action on what is right and just" (p. 12). I seek to review and extract narrative events that resist the types of neoliberal perspectives that are, to my mind, the sources of most, if not all, issues of social justice in modern times. Should it be discovered that *Game of Thrones* offers avenues of resistance, I believe others may be in a position to replicate the show's formula. If the

television series can demonstrate how its narrative has the capability to be used for the

pursuit of social justice, then others can use other narratives in the same way. On the

other hand, should it be discovered that *Game of Thrones* replicates and circulates a

pro-neoliberal ideology, it is equally important to study the implications of the show's

messages for its audience, particularly a show as popular as *Game of Thrones*.

Method

I turn to content analysis as the most appropriate method to address my research

question. Krippendorff (2004) explains that content analysis is an "analysis of the

manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (as a book or film) ... to

ascertain its meaning and probable effect." (p. xvii) In this examination of *Game of*

Thrones, will discover whether the show pushes a narrative that promotes neoliberal

ideology or pushes narratives that resist said ideology. By using a method informed by

content analysis, this paper seeks to reveal what the meaning of the narrative is, and

the ideology that informs it. This paper addresses the assumptions which underlie the

narrative (the latent content), the ways in which it may address the audience beyond the

immediate situation or, more specifically, to discover whether the narrative reinforces or

resists neoliberalism through underlying meaning or speaking beyond the immediate

situation.

First, I developed a coding sheet of sorts (appendix A) to sort quotes and

narrative events by their assigned topic of power or wealth/class. When I assign the

quote to a topic, I make an initial assessment of its relation to neoliberalism. Depending

on the number of quotes that are collected, it may be necessary to determine which quotes are more significant than the rest. Based on the first-glance assessment, I conduct a thorough analysis drawing upon the literature that has been presented thus far in this paper. Taken together, these analysis of quotations and narrative events will lead me to conclude whether *Game of Thrones* is resistant.

My literature review has established that narratives in pop culture can serve as vessels for ideology. As Stuart Hall (2016) states, "The conditions within which people are able to construct subjective possibilities and new political subjectivities for themselves are not simply given in the dominant system. They are won in the practices of articulation which produce them" (p. 205). New subjectivities or new perspectives will not be available to the public from the dominant system. The method of content analysis allows for this paper to examine what is being said beyond the surface of the narrative and make an educated claim as to which ideology informs it.

<u>Analysis</u>

<u>Kings and Lords</u>

Game of Thrones begins its discussion on power by questioning the qualities of those with power. More specifically, it questions the qualities of kings through the character Robert Baratheon. Robert Baratheon, unlike those before him, did not inherit his crown from his father but took it by rebelling against the previous dynasty (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019). Robert's qualities are his strength, his commanding presence, and his willingness to be cruel. The narrative questions these qualities and whether they make

for a good king. Clearly, the narrative would imply that these qualities were necessary

for Roberts's ascension to the throne, however, it does not paint Robert as a good king.

Robert is shown to be self-interested and uninterested in the ruling of his kingdom. As

he states himself, "I'm trying to get you to run my kingdom while I eat, drink and whore

my way to an early grave." (s01e01) While Robert is king, he passes off his

responsibility to others, by making Ned Stark the Hand of the king ("Um, what's the line?

The king shits and the Hand wipes"). It is through Ned Stark that we learn that not only

is Robert not interested in the ruling of his kingdom but through his own self-interest has

placed his kingdom in economic ruin, "six million in debt." (s01e03) It is also through

Ned that we see Robert's capacity for cruelty, as Robert wants "to assassinate a girl

because the spider heard a rumour?" (s01e05) Robert wants to assassinate this girl

because she is a threat to his throne because her child would have a better claim to the

throne than he would. To protect his self-interest Robert is willing to commit extreme

acts of cruelty, and others validate these actions by saying, "It is a terrible thing we must

consider, a vile thing. Yet we who presume to rule must sometimes do vile things for the

good of the realm." (s01e05) The narrative up until this point, while it does not paint

Robert as a good King, seems to reinforce the idea that kings must be cruel should they

want to continue ruling and protect over those they rule. As Robert states, "Honour?!

I've got seven kingdoms to rule! One king, seven kingdoms. Do you think honour keeps

them in line? Do you think it's an honour that's keeping the peace? - It's fear - fear and

blood." (s01e05) However, the narrative soon begins to challenge this notion, primarily

with Ned's protest of Robert's decision, but it also challenges this notion with the

following quote, "Where is it written that power is the sole province of the worst? That thrones are only made for the hated and the feared?" (s01e05)

The neoliberal discourse surrounding leadership, in which democracies have adopted, it is widely accepted that a strong leader is a good thing (Brown, 2014). The audience could, in this case, relate Robert's behaviour and actions to leaders in their own countries. An example that Brown (2014) gives comes from Great Britain: "When he was Leader of the Opposition, Tony Blair liked to portray the British prime minister, John Major, who had inherited a divided parliamentary party, as 'weak'" (p. 2). In many ways, the actions of one leader to depict a rival as weak and themselves as strong has become commonplace in most democracies. The opportunity for the audience to negotiate or take up *Game of Thrones*' codes as a form of resistance lies in the ability of this series to criticize 'strong' leadership. Brown believes it is an illusion "that the more power one individual leader wields the more we should be impressed by that leader" (p. 1). *Game of Thrones* begins to question the very nature of power by challenging these qualities that have been associated with kings thus far. Why must kings be cruel? Why must kings be feared? Is it not possible for a king to be gentle or loved? Is it possible for a king to not act in his own self-interest and instead act for the good of his people? These are the questions that the series has posed to the audience. With Robert's death, the 'Game of Thrones' begins, and "When you play the game of thrones, you win…or you die. There is no middle ground" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s01e07). The narrative plans exploring these questions by having different characters compete in the 'Game of Thrones,' and by having clear victors and losers, perhaps an answer can be found.

It should be acknowledged that the issue of 'strong' leadership could be attributed to any society, not just a neoliberal one. As such I believe that the series is attempting to ease its audience into a greater discussion about society as a whole by beginning its discussion surrounding leadership. Here *Game of Thrones* offers the opportunity to attribute the qualities of these characters to in positions of leadership in reality. A negotiated or resistant position to neoliberal leadership would develop as the series encourages certain qualities in leaders while discouraging others stereotypically associated with neoliberal discourse. Simultaneously, and more to the focus of this paper, *Game of Thrones* demonstrates the ways in which neoliberal discourse revolving around individualism and competition has taken over statecraft (Davies, 2016). Individualism, however, is demonstrated in a way that individual leaders act purely in their own self-interest. Those who follow them swear loyalty to these leaders to secure their own interests rather than support what is best for all. Competition is demonstrated as individual leaders are expected to compete rather than work together for a common good. These notions have become a commonplace in neoliberal society, where 'strong' leadership has become synonymous with competition in statecraft. These notions, however, are contrary to the neoliberal discourse that would say that individualism and competition will lead to the betterment of the world I don't believe that *Game of Thrones* has accepted this reality as simply "the way it is," but demonstrates that there is a bigger problem than just leadership, and rather with the system as a whole.

Parallel to the discussion of power is the discussion of wealth. As has been partially addressed already, Robert has put his kingdom 6 million gold in debt. Half of this debt is owed to a character named Tywin Lannister. This poses some interesting

questions, like what happens to the King should he not repay his debts? This question is especially pressing when the narrative explained that the previous King was usurped. The discussion of wealth becomes intertwined with that of power in this series. Does the King hold all the power? Or does Tywin because the King is in debt to him? Even Robert himself acknowledges that "Now we've got as many armies as there are men with gold in their purse. And everybody wants something different. Your father wants to own the world" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s01e05). Similar to the discussion of qualities necessary to rule now enters the role of wealth. The narrative seems to imply that wealth can make you as, or if not more, powerful then the king. The dichotomy of whether a king should be feared or loved becomes a trichotomy including the now wealthy class because "Who can rule without wealth or fear or love?" (s01e06)

Robert's acknowledgement of the limitations of his position can be paralleled with the fundamental principle of neoliberalism which is the deregulation of the state. His inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to intervene in the scrabbles of lords demonstrates at the very least that he is not as powerful as people believe him to be. This leads to the role of wealth in neoliberal society. The neoliberal discourse would say that all individuals are equal under democracy, that each vote matters. However, compared to critics that say, "Politics... was being corrupted as the role of wealth grew" (Phillips, 2003, p. xi), the series begins to demonstrate the relationship between wealth and power. Further, in the case of the United States, society has been described as a plutocracy governed by or in the interest of the wealthiest. The potential for the audience to negotiate or take up the series' narrative lies in how the series resists neoliberal ideology on power, by acknowledging the unbalanced role that wealth plays

in democracies. *Game of Thrones* acknowledges that wealth has weakened the authority of the king, especially when that wealth is in the hands of individuals other than himself. As such, individuals with wealth are left relatively unchecked, just as a neoliberal society advocates for a free market. The consequences of which will be discussed promptly, as what discussions of wealth in the narrative acknowledge are discussions surrounding class.

Peasants

The question of class is delegated primarily to the narrative surrounding the 'night's watch' and the character Jon Snow. Jon, the bastard son of Ned Stark, who is displeased with the state of this organization, states the following, "My father knew and he left me to rot at the Wall all the same" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s01e03). Jon sees the others joining the 'night's watch' as beneath him, as they are peasants or criminals or both. Here Tyron Lannister challenges his perception of these peasants with the following quote, "Grenn's father left him too… outside a farmhouse, when he was three. Pyp was caught stealing a wheel of cheese. His little sister hadn't eaten in three days. He was given a choice, his right hand or the Wall. I've been asking the Lord Commander about them. Fascinating stories." Here we understand that there is a class hierarchy in this country, between peasants and the ruling class. The ruling class made up of lords and knights, which live a life of privilege, while the peasants must fend for their own survival. It is through these peasants' suffering that the ruling class can live in privilege, "They die in pain. And they do it… so plump little lords like you can enjoy their summer afternoons in peace and comfort." (s01e03) It is here where the class structure

is questioned. Jon, still believing himself better than those that have joined the Night's watch, is shut down with the following statement, "Better than no one! Here…a man gets what he earns, when he earns it." The night's watch allows the narrative to show just how flimsy these class lines are. Given an area to demonstrate how individuals, when stripped of their privileges, are truly equal, the narrative poses the question of what purpose these classes truly serve? At the very least the audience is meant to ponder the ways in which these 'criminals' were not given the same opportunities to thrive as our main characters were. But primarily it demonstrates to the audience that this class structure only benefits the ruling class.

This narrative challenge the neoliberal discourse surrounding wealth. This discourse is that all individuals have the same ability to accumulate wealth and, by consequence, can transcend class lines. In this case, the audience could negotiate or take up the codes that indicate how neoliberalism has created the conditions in which keep people poor, as well as the ways it punishes the poor. "How public officials responded to this emerging marginality (which their own economic and social policies spawned) through punitive containment" (Wacquant, 2009, p. 315). The rise of the penal state in the United States, which most western countries have embraced, was a response not to the rise in crime, but rather to the dislocation of those trapped at the bottom of the class structure. *Game of Thrones* demonstrates the ways in which the peasant class is punished simply because they are poor. Most of the characters are given the option between death and the Wall based on the crimes they committed, which they committed due to their circumstances. It also recognizes the ways in which the ruling class, or the "top 1 percent" (Dorling, 2014), impact the lives of the rest of the

world. This impact is inequality and poverty, which has had terrible effects on the health and well-being of the rest of society.

Power is an illusion

The discussion of power continues as the war for the throne breaks out throughout the country. Most contenders for the throne act similarly to how Robert acted, stating that other contenders will, "bend the knee or I'll destroy them" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s02e01). Most contenders are acting in their own self-interest, rather than that of the people they intend on ruling. They commit acts of cruelty such as burning their enemies alive or assassinating children that might pose a threat to their rule. They do this because they believe that, "This is what ruling is, lying on a bed of weeds, ripping them out by the root, one by one, before they strangle you in your sleep." (s02e02) But as has been discussed before and the narrative would seem to imply, "I'm no king, but I think there's more to ruling than that." The narrative stresses this point even further with the following quote:

> Does it? He has neither crown, nor gold, nor favour with the gods. He has a sword, the power of life and death. But if it's swordsmen who rule, why do we pretend kings hold all the power? When Ned Stark lost his head, who was truly responsible? Joffrey? The executioner? Or something else?... Power resides where men believe it resides. It's a trick, a shadow on the wall. And a very small man can cast a very large shadow. (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s02e03)

This quote challenges the very nature of power within this series. Not only does it dismiss the very notion that kings or even the wealthy hold power, but it pushes the idea that power is an illusion. That power is tied to an individual's belief. Therefore, the idea that king must be cruel or feared is an illusion just the same. The idea that wealth equates to power is just as well an illusion. The influence that kings or wealth have

relied on individuals' belief in them. Therefore, alternative qualities of power can be explored when individuals believe in them.

In neoliberal discourse, there is a common belief of "'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). 'Capitalist realism' is a way those who support neoliberal and capitalist discourses can acknowledge the 'bumps' in the system while simultaneously dismissing them, as they would argue there are no other options. *Game of Thrones* works to dismiss the ways in which their system has been perceived as natural, that kings have always been cruel, and the wealthy have always abused their power. By doing so it also questions the very structure of power in their world. The way in which the world of *Game of Thrones* is shaped exists because individuals believe it is the only way it can be shaped. The audience here could negotiate or take up the series narrative surrounding the illusion of power as Fisher explains that "capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself" (p. 5). To challenge the neoliberal discourse surrounding 'capitalist realism' is to believe that there could be an alternative. *Game of Thrones* is making the claim that power exists where individuals believe it exists, that it is a trick, and that anyone can become powerful. In this sense, the series can begin to explore alternatives to current forms of power, more specifically different qualities in kings.

Good Kings and Queens

The narrative then begins to explore the ways in which it believes that a ruler should not act in his own self-interest, rather "I want you to serve the realm!" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s01e09). All this to say that if the ruling class does not benefit the peasant class, what purpose does it serve? The narrative demonstrates alternatives to Kings like Robert Baratheon and those who would follow in his footsteps through characters like Rob Stark and Daenerys Targaryen. Rob Stark, unlike Robert Baratheon or the dynasty before him, was chosen to be king. After their previous lord, Ned Stark, was in their eyes wrongfully executed in an act of cruelty, the people of the north select Rob Stark to be the 'King in the North' as a greater alternative to the tyrants of the south. Daenerys, similarly, is chosen to be Queen after she frees slaves. Daenerys tells them, "I see the faces of slaves. I free you. Take off your collars. Go if you wish, no one will stop you. But if you stay… it will be as brothers and sisters, as husbands and wives." (s01e10) Daenerys and Rob challenge the traditional qualities of kings/queens primarily because they were chosen and did not force themselves upon those they would rule. Those who follow them do so because they believe in them. They also challenge the idea that kings/queens act in their own self-interest. Rob demonstrates this when he says:

> He once told me that being a lord is like being a father, except you have thousands of children and you worry about all of them. The farmers ploughing the fields are yours to protect. The charwomen scrubbing the floors, yours to protect. The soldiers you order into battle. He told me he woke with fear in the morning and went to bed with fear in the night. I didn't believe him. I asked him, "How can a man be brave if he's afraid?" "That is the only time a man can be brave," he told me. (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s02e08)

Daenerys acts in a very similar way, putting her people before herself, "You may cover it up and deny it, but you have a gentle heart. You would not only be respected and

feared, you would be loved. Someone who can rule and should rule." (s02e05) The narrative presents these two characters as the alternative to bad kings such as Robert Baratheon, and the other contenders who act like him. In many ways, the narrative pushes these two characters into a very positive light, and it is clear from the perspective of this paper that the audience is meant to be rooting for these characters.

Here the narrative has shown that there are characters that can act altruistically. I am in no way stating that they are perfect as no characters in this show are. However, they offer a drastic contrast to the others competing in the 'Game of Thrones.' The potential for the audience's reception lies in the recognition that selfish leaders are a problem, and altruist leaders are the solution. When compared to criticisms of neoliberal discourse surrounding leadership, Brookes (2016) would agree that "taking a somewhat provocative approach, this book will suggest that the crises of leadership (so often identified in recent scandals) are more to do with the selfish and egotistic motivations of individual leaders rather than the selfless and collective motivations focused on shared values" (p. xv). *Game of Throne*s would like to move the goals of leadership away from individuality and towards collectivism. This is especially true in *Game of Thrones* when it focuses on how other contenders of the throne treat the peasant class.

The other contenders to the throne are painted in a very negative light; this is especially true of Cersei Lannister and her treatment of the peasant class. Cersei herself states, "Shut the gates to the peasants. They belong in the field, not our capital" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s02e01). In her own self-interest, she creates great tension between the ruling class and the peasant class, and her brother Tyrion tells her that, "You might find it difficult to rule over millions who want you dead. Half the city will

starve when winter comes. The other half will plot to overthrow you." (s02e02) As has been mentioned previously, the series begins to question what purpose these class lines have, especially when most contenders to the throne seem to care little about the wellbeing of those they rule over. The narrative seems to imply that the peasant class has no need for rulers who will not protect them. This is especially poignant when riots break out in the capital and noblemen are killed by peasants because "You are everything he will never have. Your horse eats better than his children." (s02e06)

Dorling (2014) explains that the wealthiest 1% have had a significantly negative impact on the other 99% of the human population: they have affected education, employment, the cost of homes, and health. Here the audience could recognize how this series narrative points toward the divide between the elite rich and the rest of society. This divide has made social mobility difficult, if not impossible, for all. Furthermore, Cersei's attitude or outlook of the peasants could point to how there are some amongst the 1% who believe that inequality is good, that the poor deserve to be poor because they don't have the 'strength' to be better, and that the rich are worthy of their wealth. However, while this opinion is rather extreme, neoliberal discourse surrounding individualism does place the responsibility of these 'misfortunes' on individual actions rather than address a systemic issue. *Game of Thrones'* narrative has demonstrated that the actions of the ruling class have negatively affected the peasant class, rather than demonstrating their suffering as a result of their own actions. It is up to the audience to negotiate or see how this challenges neoliberal discourse.

As the narrative progresses the ruling class in this series has caused an incredible amount of harm to those of the peasant class. This is especially true when

the narrative introduces the 'brotherhood without banners' who state that, "The lords of Westeros want to burn the countryside. We're trying to save it" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s03e02). More and more emphasis on protecting those of the peasant class is reinforced, and those who take action to protect them are celebrated by the narrative, such as Daenerys who continues to free slaves. As specific characters are celebrated for their actions it becomes clear that the narrative wants the audience to root for characters like Rob Stark and Daenerys. As their victories become even more certain, the narrative has still not finished its discussion on power.

Rob Stark thus far has been painted as the perfect example of what the narrative believes a ruler should be: he isn't cruel which is shown in his unwillingness to execute or torture prisoners, with the exception of his decision to forsake his wedding vows, he is selfless as he puts his people before himself. And yet at his uncle's wedding, he is massacred along with the rest of his army. Daenerys, who is painted in a very similar light, begins committing acts of cruelty as she states, "I will not let those I have freed slide back into chains" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s04e05). While Daenerys does not commit these acts for her own self-interest, these two characters were meant to be the narratives alternative to bad kings/queens. Yet with Rob now dead, and Daenerys now verging towards the same qualities the show had demonstrated as negative, there seem to be no other alternatives. Tywin Lannister, who was demonstrated earlier to be the wealthiest individual in the series, now rules over the country with no other contenders in sight. Not only was he demonstrated as wealthy, but he was also shown as cruel as he was willing to torture prisoners and massacre Rob Stark at a wedding. He is now in many ways the most powerful man in the country when he states to his

nephew Joffrey who is now king, "Any man who must say, 'I am the King,' is no true king. I'll make sure you understand that when I've won your war for you." (s03e10) So, is this the narrative's answer to the questions of power? That if you are wealthy and willing to act cruel for your own self-interest, that you are the best fit to rule? That the peasant class will always suffer under those who rule? Is there no feasible alternative to this type of ruler? That, "Stannis is a killer. The Lannisters are killers. Your father was a killer. Your brother is a killer. Your sons will be killers someday. The world is built by killers." (s02e09) Is the audience supposed to just accept these actions as 'the way it is'? The simple answer to these questions is no. I believe, and will continue to demonstrate, that the narrative has used its discussion about rulers, wealth, and class to ease the audience into a larger perhaps more complex discussion. Perhaps Tywin gained control of this country not because he was the best suited to rule, but rather he was the best at playing the 'Game of Thrones.'

I have already discussed the ways in which the audience could receive *Game of Thrones*' narrative as a criticism of how neoliberal discourse has encouraged the election of 'strong' and selfish leaders, as well as the ways in which wealth has corrupted politics. Rob Stark's death and the consolidation of Tywin Lannister's power can be interpreted as what occurs in a neoliberal society. One of the fundamental elements of neoliberalism as an ideology is that the state's purpose is to maintain a free market, not interfere with it. While it can only be assumed how Rob Stark would have acted as king, his sense of justice and honor would not allow him to sit idly by while lords trampled on innocent people as Robert did. An example I would draw from is the 2016 United States election when Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist and career

independent lost the candidacy to Hillary Clinton despite record-breaking numbers

among young voters (Gautney, 2018). As Gauntney states, "she was historically

unpopular, beset by repeated scandal, and fervently rejected by the party's progressive

base" (p. 1) but she was overwhelmingly favoured by the party. Perhaps more poignant

to the comparison being made is the fact that Donald Trump, a billionaire reality TV star

and real estate mogul, known for his extremist views and social indecency won the

presidency.

This paper does not wish to paint Rob Stark as Bernie Sanders or Tywin

Lannister as Donald Trump but acknowledge the ways in which in *Game of Thrones*,

the 'strong', selfish and wealthy still win over the altruistic. Also, how politics seem to

discourage those who do not express the neoliberal ideology. The audience could

negotiate or take up the ways in which a socialist like Bernie Sanders threatened the

1%, to the ways in which Rob Stark threatened the interests of the ruling lords. As the

pursuit of an alternative type of leader seems to have met its defeat in the series, *Game

of Thrones* begins to expand its conversation about power. Rather than discuss leaders

it chooses to discuss systems.

The system

The narrative switches away from conversations about the qualities of rulers and

more towards the discussion of the system in which this country operates. The first time

this system is really discussed is with the following quote:

> The realm? Do you know what the realm is? It's the blades of Aegon's enemies.
> A story we agree to tell each other over and over, till we forget that it's a lie…
> Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder. Many who try to climb it fail and never get to
> try again. The fall breaks them. And some are given a chance to climb, but they

refuse. They cling to the realm of the Gods or love. Illusions. Only the ladder is real. The climb is all there is (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s03e06).

The system is described as a ladder, where individuals compete to get to the top. It was never designed so that those at the top were meant to act in a specific way, whether that be cruel or kind, self-interested or selfless, the climb is all that matters. All that matters is securing power and holding on to it as long as one can. What has been made clear in the series' examination of different qualities of kings is that the climb is easier for those who can commit acts of cruelty, have tremendous wealth, and act in their own self-interest. However, it is also clear that no matter who makes it to the top of this ladder will not stay there for long. Tywin Lannister, who made it to the top of the ladder fell from the top only one season after he reached it (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019). The series then begins to question this 'ladder.' What is the point of it all? How many lives were wasted just so that one person could hold on to power for a few years or less? If Rob Stark, for example, made it to the top of the ladder, how long would he have stayed there before someone knocked him down? Would he have been able to make a difference in his short time there? This is the question being asked in this quote:

> I know. But still it filled me with dread. Piles and piles of them, years and years of them. How many countless living, crawling things smashed and dried out and returned to the dirt? In my dreams I found myself standing on a beach made of beetle husks stretching as far as the eye could see. I woke up crying, weeping for their shattered little bodies. I tried to stop Orson once… He just pushed me aside with a "cuhn" and kept on smashing. Every day, until that mule kicked him in the chest and killed him. So, what do you think? Why did he do it? What was it all about? (s04e08)

What *Game of Thrones* begins to ask is what is the point of this system. If this system encourages individuals to compete constantly, and this competition results in the suffering and deaths of millions so that an individual can hold on to power for a mere

moment before someone else snatches it away from them, then what is the point? What is the point of the peasant class being subservient to the ruling class when all the ruling class cares about is obtaining and holding on to power? Especially when the peasant class suffers the most when the ruling class competes in 'the climb.'

The primary discourse surrounding neoliberalism is competition. As Davies (2016) explains, "Instead, the neoliberal state takes the principle of competition and the ethos of competitiveness (which historically have been found in and around markets) and seeks to reorganize society around them" (p. xvi). Davies explains how beyond politicians and the market, individuals are tested in terms of their ability to out-do each other. This is what can be described as a meritocracy. As *Game of Thrones* begins to discuss, this system assigns the majority of people to what Davies (2016) describes as 'losers': that if an individual fails to make the 'climb', it is because of their inadequate talent or energy rather than the unfair system they are forced to compete in. In many ways this logic has been demonstrated through conversations about class (how the peasants suffered under the lords), but blamed poor leadership rather than ideology. Regarding poor leadership, or the death of Tywin, Davies explains that "a culture that valorizes 'winning' and 'competitiveness' above all else provides few sources of security or comfort, even to those doing reasonably well" (p. xvii). People will constantly be competing in this system, and it will give them very little time to rest before being overtaken by someone else. This is where the audience could negotiate or take up the idea that perhaps our problem is not bad leaders, but rather an ideology whose discourse has spread competition to every crevice of society. A competition that has delegated not 50%, but 99% of the population to the position of loser, and that these

'losers' are solely responsible for their suffering, not the neoliberal ideology that has influenced policies that have created these conditions. These conditions were created not for the betterment of all individuals, but so that a dwindling 1% of the population can hold on to their power and wealth for as long as they possibly can. What *Game of Thrones* will ask next however, is can we not do better than this?

<u>Replacing the ladder</u>

Most narrative surrounding the alternative to, or changing, the system being described previously, occurs with the character Daenerys. Daenerys is struggling to keep the slaves that she freed from falling back into slavery. In her frustration she begins to act cruelly, using her dragons to kill ex-slavers. This is where conversations about changing the system really begin. Daenerys' advisors warn against her actions stating that "Herding the masters into pens and slaughtering them by the thousands is also treating men like beasts. The slaves you freed, brutality is all they've ever known. If you want them to know something else, you'll have to show it to them" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s04e07). This is where Daenerys begins talking about a new world, a world in which the powerful do not trample over the weak. She begins to understand that if she wants to create this new world, she will have to show those who follow her a different path. While Daenerys begins this conversation, she is in many ways unable to let go of her cruelty as she states, "They can live in my new world or they can die in their old one." While Daenerys is struggling to create her new world, others from afar begin to see the potential she has in completing such a task. Tyrion Lannister and Varys the Spider discuss how they want to change the world as well, and how Daenerys might

be their best chance in doing so. Tyrion asks Varys, "What is it you want exactly?" to which Varys responds, "Peace. Prosperity. A land where the powerful do not prey on the powerless." (s05e01) Tyrion dismisses his answer by saying, "The powerful have always preyed on the powerless. That's how they became powerful in the first place." Varys concludes by stating, "Perhaps. And perhaps we've grown so used to horror, we assume there's no other way." In many ways, all three of these characters understand that the world needs to change for the better. That if the powerful prey on the powerless, peace and prosperity can never be obtained.

Returning to the work of Fisher (2009), "what we are dealing with now, however, is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (p. 7). Like Tyrion, who has lost hope for a world in which the powerful do not prey on the powerless, neoliberal discourse explains that there is no alternative to neoliberalism or capitalism for that matter. However, what the narrative now begins to discuss is the resurgence of such a hope in the shape of Daenerys Targaryen. That perhaps Daenerys can create a world where the powerful do not prey on the weak, or what Brookes (2016) would describe as creating "the conditions in which selfless behaviour is encouraged and rewarded, rather than setting the diktat from 'above' and then putting in place control measures to ensure that their objectives are met, regardless as to how they are achieved in some of the more extreme cases of selfless leadership" (p. xvi).

<u>The rise of the peasants</u>

While these three characters speak towards changing the world, they mostly speak about power and not class. The narrative then introduces a new character, the

High Sparrow. He understands that the differences between lord and peasants are illusions, that, "The notion that we're all equal in the eyes of the Seven doesn't sit well with some, so they belittle me" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s05e03). The High Sparrow has seen the horrors that have fallen upon the peasants and wants to hold those who are responsible because, "Too often the wicked are the wealthiest, beyond the reach of justice." As the High Sparrow gains a larger and larger following the ruling class begins to see him as a threat, and as such, they begin to threaten him. He responds to these threats with the following quote, "Have you ever sowed the field, Lady Olenna? Have you ever reaped the grain? Has anyone in House Tyrell? A lifetime of wealth and power has left you blind in one eye. You are the few, we are the many. And when the many stop fearing the few…" (s05e07) As that narrative previously began to ask the questions of what would happen if the ruling class could not guarantee the safety and prosperity of the peasant class, the high sparrow became the answer. Perhaps not an answer to how to make a better world, but at least an answer to how the peasant class responds to their suffering.

Conversations regarding the many versus the few could remind the audience of the discourse set by the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. As Chomsky (2012) explains the movement was the first public response to thirty years of class war. The Occupy movement brought forward discussions of inequality to the forefront of the national agenda in the United States and demonstrated how the U.S. population believes that there is a conflict between the rich and the poor. The struggles of those without resources, without a voice, without access to power, those who were traditionally ignored had entered into the popular discourse. Neoliberal discourse led to

the great divide between rich and poor (Harvey, 2005). While the High Sparrow is a complicated character, the narrative surrounding him could allow the audience to negotiate or understand that the more conditions worsen, the more change to the system is required. This narrative in many ways supports any frustration to this system.

However, the High Sparrow is complicated. In many ways, he does not want to change the world for the better, but rather topple the hierarchy of peasants and lord. He does not end suffering but rather places it on the lords who often have escaped it. In many ways, the High Sparrow is just another contender making 'the climb.' But unlike others who used their wealth and cruelty to ascend the 'ladder,' he used religion. In this instance, the narrative paints religion in a negative light. Rather than subjugation along class lines, subjugation is committed in a very bigoted way as, "All sinners are equal before the Gods" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s05e04). As this is not an analysis of the discussions surrounding religion in this series, this paper will not explore it further. But I do wish to acknowledge the ways in which Cersei blew up the High Sparrows church with him and his followers inside it. Perhaps the audience can negotiate or see how Cersei's violent response to this movement compares to the suppression of protests, or the ways in which Wood (2014) would explain that the policing of protest in western countries is now both more militarized and pre-emptive control than in the past. This increase must be the effect of the real economic structures that have taken shape under neoliberal ideology. Finally, how the possibilities for dissent decreased and became much more limited. Unfortunately, as the High Sparrows death implies, this is the most the narrative discusses about class, as discussions of class do not truly

continue in the series, but rather alluded to in conversations about creating a better world.

The Wheel

It is clear, at least to me, that the most important conversations about making a better world surround Daenerys and Tyrion. It is in a conversation between Daenerys and Tyrion that it is finally established that there is a 'wheel' of oppression in this world. As Daenerys states, "Lannister, Targaryen, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell. They're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top. And on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s05e08). Unlike the quote involving the 'ladder,' the 'wheel' acknowledges that those fighting for power are crushing those underneath them. This is where the point or argument of this series takes shape: that for this world to truly become better it isn't a matter of merely "stopping the wheel." Rather, as Daenerys says, "I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel." That if there is going to be an end to the constant cycle of lords fighting for power, while the peasant class suffers for it, the wheel needs to be broken and replaced with something new.

What is breaking 'the wheel'?

Thus far I have explored the many ways that the audience could negotiate or accept how *Game of Thrones*' narrative criticizes neoliberal discourse. It could be argued that audience members may undertake a form of resistance akin to what Gramsci (1999) called negative resistance, coming to a collective understanding that

neoliberalism is "without foundation" (p. 790). However, I believe that a narrative's

ending, or lesson, is just as important as the struggle. As such, I argue that the narrative

form of *Game of Thrones* fosters what Gramsci would call positive resistance by

opposing "philosophical syntheses of greater importance and significance" to "the

scientific works and the great philosophical syntheses which are [the] real cornerstones"

of mass ideology (p. 790). Rather than simply criticizing neoliberal discourse, the series

offers possible alternatives to the underlying conditions of neoliberal structures of

power. The idea of 'breaking the wheel' is a *Game of Thrones*' attempt to offer a greater

alternative to the system it has revealed in the series, and by consequence of my logic,

to neoliberalism as well. The degree to which the narrative accomplishes this will be

explored further.

Both Tyrion and Daenerys recognize how difficult of a task this will be as Tyrion

states, "Slavery is a horror that should be ended at once. War is a horror that should be

ended at once. I can't do both today." (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s06e04) They

also recognize how violence will play a role in creating this new world, and the

contradiction of its role, "Violence is a disease. You don't cure a disease by spreading it

to more people." (s06e07) Some characters justify the violence stating that "but after

we've won and there's no one left to oppose us, when people are living peacefully in the

world she built, do you really think they'll wring their hands over the way she built it?"

Others disagree with the lengths in which Daenerys goes to create her new world:

> When she crucified hundreds of Meereenese nobles, who could argue? They
> were evil men. The Dothraki khals she burned alive? They would have done
> worse to her. Everywhere she goes, evil men die and we cheer her for it. And
> she grows more powerful and more sure that she is good and right. She believes
> her destiny is to build a better world for everyone. If you believed that if you truly
> believed it, wouldn't you kill whoever stood between you and paradise? (s08e06)

The narrative argues that violence was not the way to create a better world. The audience can negotiate or accept the ways that *Game of Thrones* codes violence as a tool of neoliberalism. Daenerys finally takes the throne, but she did so by massacring thousands of innocents. The narrative paints her as a villain for her actions regardless of her intentions. It is in a conversation between her and Jon Snow where Jon says, "The world we need won't be built by men loyal to the world we have. The world we need is a world of mercy… It's not easy to see something that's never been before."

Here the narrative acknowledges that violence is the tool of the old world, while also treading the complexities of violence as well. In neoliberal discourse, it is expected that protests, for example, will turn violent when they are met by harsh state violence (Seferiades & Johnston, 2016). Those protests, even violent ones, are linked to the progress of democracy. It could be negotiated or argued that violence between Daenerys and the ruling class was inevitable in this case. However, Daenerys went beyond simply responding to the violent acts of the ruling class and used her dragons to burn the very people she claimed to liberate. This is where the narrative begins to fall short, at least from my perspective.

Daenerys was used to begin the conversation about making a better world rather than finding a better king/queen. It could be argued that her story is a warning about the temptation of the 'ladder' or the 'wheel', that even the most ideologically driven can be caught playing the game rather than changing it. However, with Daenerys's death, the other characters still believe in her dream and claim to 'break the wheel' in her place. It is Tyrion that states, "Sons of kings can be cruel and stupid, as you well know. His will never torment us. That is the wheel our queen wanted to break. From now on, rulers will

not be born. They will be chosen on this spot by the lords and ladies of Westeros to serve the realm" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s08e06). If, up to this point, the audience has accepted, or at the very least negotiated, the ways in which the narrative criticizes neoliberal discourse, from my perspective, this solution would be perceived as a contradiction. What is the narrative's solution to end a cycle of lords fighting for power, crushing the peasants underneath them? Apparently, it does so by giving more power to those very lords to decide who should be king or queen. Its discussion of class is completely disregarded as it dismisses the very notion of including the peasants in this decision with statements such as "Maybe we should give the dogs a vote as well" and "I'll ask my horse."

If the argument of my paper is to be believed, *Game of Thrones* offered many instances to negotiate or take up the criticisms of neoliberal discourse encoded in its narrative. But a lot of importance is placed on the ending of a narrative, as that is where the lesson is learned. This narrative's lesson would have the audience believe that a system in which the elite degrade workers' rights, increase their own power, deteriorate democracy, increase exploitation and social injustice can be broken by giving more power to those elites that created these very conditions. I do not want to criticize the quality of this ending, rather point out that any opportunity for the audience to negotiate or take up this series' narrative as a form of resistance to neoliberal ideology is weakened by it.

Discussion

I originally asked: How might the narrative of *Game of Thrones* as an element of mainstream pop culture resist dominant ideologies about power and class? After an examination of *Game of Thrones*' narrative surrounding discourses of power and wealth/class, I have concluded that *Game of Thrones* is resistant but fails to offer a reasonable alternative to the system it is criticizing. When we look at Gramsci's (1999) definitions of resistance to dominant ideology there are two separate types, negative and positive. *Game of Thrones*, as was shown in the analysis of this paper, gave its audience the opportunity to negotiate or take up negative forms of resistance.

First, with conversations of power, *Game of Thrones* clearly suggests that power is not divided equally amongst its people. Neoliberal discourse would imply that when free from government interference, economies will grow which will lead to human progress (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism reinforces the perspective that individuals are equal through democracy. While *Game of Thrones* depicts a monarchy, parallels can be drawn to democracies in reality. As Dean (2009) explained, "Real existing constitutional democracies privilege the wealthy. As they install, extend, and protect neoliberal capitalism, they exclude, exploit, and oppress the poor, all the while promising that everybody wins" (p. 76). Here the audience can negotiate or compare how the monarchy, or the 'wheel,' in *Game of Thrones* only benefits those of the ruling class. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that Kings and Queens do not hold the power in this series, rather wealthy individuals fueled by their own self-interest do. When kings and queens do not please the wealthy lords, wars break out and those kings or queens are replaced. Through discussions of neoliberal discourse on power, and their associated criticism, I believe that *Game of Thrones* allowed its audience the opportunity to

negotiate or take up a resistance to such discourses, as it demonstrated that power is held by a privileged minority.

Second, the audience could negotiate or take up the resistant codes surrounding discourse about wealth and class. Similar to the conversation of power, neoliberal discourse would express that all individuals are capable of obtaining wealth equally, and by consequence able to transcend class lines. But as Dumenil and Levy (2013) explain, neoliberalism has only strengthened the ability of a privileged class to obtain wealth. Here the audience could come to interpret *Game of Thrones'* depiction of the peasant class's suffering under those of the ruling class. Many conversations in the series show that the peasants are subservient to the accumulation of the ruling class's wealth, and with their constant wars the peasant class is incapable of prospering. The series also demonstrates the flimsy nature of these class lines through the 'Night's watch,' The series goes even as far as to demonstrate the ways in which the peasant class gets frustrated and begins to revolt against the ruling class.

Where the narrative of power and wealth/class come together is when it switches towards a conversation about a system, or the 'wheel.' *Game of Thrones* allows the audience to negotiate or take up criticism of neoliberal discourse on a large scale, as it portrays a system in which competition is a way of life and by consequence a large portion of the population is delegated to the role of loser. Those born into wealth have greater opportunity in this system and are portrayed as the winners, over those who had the disadvantage of being poor. However, *Game of Thrones* emphasizes the ways in which even those given the role of winner are never satisfied, that they are in a constant state of worry that someone may overtake their position in society or that there is

always someone with more than them. As such the winners, or the ruling class, act in their own self-interest to protect their position, often at the detriment of the losers, or those in the peasant class.

I have placed a lot of emphasis on Gramsci's (1999) notions of resistance as I believe both are necessary to define *Game of Thrones*' narrative as resistant. I believe this because the majority of mainstream popular culture, produced largely in part by Hollywood, has adopted resistant discourse into their narratives. But they have done so in such a way that is contained, and as Hilliard (2009) would explain, not provocative enough to invoke social action. In this light, I believe that the narrative's ending would have very little influence on an audience's ability to negotiate or take up these codes as a positive form of resistance. Conversations on how to 'break the wheel' and make a new world, or what Gramsci (1999) would describe as offering alternatives, amounted to the solution that kings, and queens will no longer be succeeded by their children. Furthermore, kings and queens will be voted in by a council made of members of the ruling class. If the audience adopts a negotiated viewing position in regard to this ending, there is no way in my mind that this would reverse the effects of neoliberal discourse. I quite simply cannot accept that giving more power to the powerful creates a better world. Also, I believe that there is a high chance that the audience would operate from what Hall (1973) would call an oppositional position in regard to this ending. Should the audience have negotiated or taken up the codes of breaking 'the wheel' to resist neoliberal discourse, the ending very well contradicts such codes. As such the ending may have ruined any legitimacy the gave the narrative to resist neoliberal discourse.

I should state that I never expected this series to give a feasible alternative to neoliberalism. I never expected that when *Game of Thrones* rolled its final credits that the audience would get out of their seats and change the world. But I cannot simply say that the narrative is resistant, because it criticizes neoliberal discourse. In many ways the series can be perceived as a strong criticism of the neoliberal ideology and its criticism could be compared to the criticisms of neoliberalism made by academics. Where *Game of Thrones*' potential showed itself was in its acknowledgement of a system and how it negatively organized the behaviour of its characters. It acknowledged how this system created inequalities of both power and wealth, and by consequence how it created class lines. I don't believe that *Game of Thrones'* claim of giving absolute control of the state to the elites is part of the neoliberal discourse, but it simply is not a solution that I believe was appropriate to the issues *Game of Thrones'* audience could have decoded.

What this paper is left to do is give an answer to the research question: How might the narrative of *Game of Thrones* as an element of mainstream pop culture resist dominant ideologies about power and class? *Game of Thrones* offered many instances to negotiate or take up codes to resist neoliberal discourse in the sense that it would resist them negatively, by criticizing neoliberalism and demonstrating that its notion of 'common sense' is without foundation (Gramsci, 1999). However, in its attempt to resist neoliberalism in a positive way, I believe that no position, whether accepted, negotiated or opposed, could *Game of Thrones* be provocative enough or lead to social change. *Game of Thrones*' narrative is left in an almost neutral position. Would Gitlin (1979), or even Hilliard (2009), see *Game of Thrones*' resistance as the hegemonic system

adopting social struggle and framing it into compatibility with the dominant systems of

meaning? The simple answer is no. It is possible to negotiate or accept the series codes

as not attempting to adhere to the discourse of neoliberalism nor distort its criticisms as

simple bumps in the road. Sure, it could be argued that the contradictory ending was an

attempt to make these topics compatible with the dominant systems of meaning.

However, as I would argue, up until the solution is presented, the series is still

attempting to discuss an alternative to this system rather than defend it. If the series had

ended by making a statement that 'the wheel' will never stop spinning and people

should get used to it then it would have aligned with what Gitlin (1979) was attempting

to argue. In this way, neoliberalism would lay all of its flaws bare but support the claim

that there is no other way. Nor does *Game of Thrones* act as a vessel for neoliberal

ideology as Hall (2016) would describe, promoting neoliberalism as a force for good.

What is left is a series that attempted to resist the dominant ideology but was held back

by its contradictory ending.

 All in all, *Game of Thrones* demonstrates the ways in which a narrative in

mainstream pop culture can criticize dominant discourse or, more specifically, criticizing

and demonstrating what it establishes as common sense as false. However what limits

Game of Thrones to be truly resistant is its ability to present its audience with

alternatives to the ideology it is criticizing. It is difficult for me to gauge the usefulness of

Game of Thrones for the pursuit of social justice. On one hand, I have argued that if

Game of Thrones could definitely be seen to offer avenues of resistance, it could have

positive effects for its audience by at least could making them aware of this criticism, but

also offering an example of how to weave critical elements into a narrative that could be

used by others hoping to do the same. With the ending of this series being the greatest outlier to allow us to arrive at a definitive answer, can we draw a conclusion? Are *Game of Thrones*' critical elements rendered useless because of its ending? Should we consider ignoring the ending in order to focus on the series' resistant elements? Neither option seems satisfactory to me, and as such this paper would offer this final statement: Resistance as set out by Gramsci (1999) is two faceted, offering both criticisms and solutions, and for narratives in mainstream pop culture to be resistant they need to address both facets. *Game of Thrones* attempted to do this but failed to offer a solution that was satisfactory, or at the very least not contradictory. Should *Game of Thrones* have given no solution at all, it would have probably fallen to the criticisms of Gitlin (1979) and Hilliard (2009). To those who wish to emulate the same type of resistance in future narratives in mainstream pop culture for the pursuit of social justice, I offer a conclusion drawn from *Game of Thrones* itself, "You're fighting to overthrow a king, and yet you have no plan for what comes after?" (Benioff, D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019, s02e04).

Here then I would call for further research to be conducted. The most logical step is to explore the other moments that Hall (1973) describes. What I mean by this is that this paper primarily focused on *Game of Thrones* as a text and missed opportunities to speak towards the encoding and decoding sides. As these moments are only slightly autonomous or independent from each other, and as such they all need to be studied.

Of primary interest to this paper is the decoding side. In many ways I point towards moments where *Game of Thrones* opens the door for negotiated readings, and I believe the next logical step is to conduct research to see how audiences negotiated *Game of Thrones*. As ultimately, the findings of this paper are the interpretation of one

audience member amongst millions. Based off Radway's (1984) work, it is fair to assume that background, education, and social circumstance would affect the ways in which *Game of Thrones'* audience would interpret or use this series. While interviews or surveys could be conducted, I believe that of greater interest are recap/review channels on YouTube. An examination of these channels that offered summaries, criticisms, and even predictions of future narrative events, could make for a discourse analysis that offers insight into the audience's interpretation of the series.

Secondly, the encoding side is of equal importance. Involved in the creation of this series was a wide variety of producers, directors, writers, and actors. Their backgrounds, whether educational, economical, etc. could be indicative of the purpose or ideological foundations of this series. HBO as a studio could be examined as well, for example, a discourse analysis of a multitude of their series and programs could be examined to establish *Game of Thrones* as a part of a discourse propagated by HBO or as an aberration to said discourse. Something that might be of interest as well is the author of the books in which *Game of Thrones* was adapted from. Not only is the author's background of interest, but differences between the books and the television series may point towards an ideological difference between the author and HBO.

Also, if others are interested in examining other series in the way that I have, I point towards series such as *American Gods* and *The Boys* that from a first glance seem to follow the same patterns as *Game of Thrones.* What I mean by this is that *Game of Thrones* has left a hole to be filled and as such many studios are chasing the success that *Game of Thrones* received. The examples I give have not only attracted a

large audience, but also seem to be written to criticize aspects of our world and seem to

be more than just mere entertainment.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Narrative	Category	Latent content
- King Robert is panted as a very strong man, physically that is. - Took his throne by force - Has been shown to be an inadequate king: "I'm trying to get you to run my kingdom while I eat, drink and whore my way to an early grave." (s01e01) "six million in debt." (s01e03) "to assassinate a girl because the spider	Power	- Robert's qualities as a king are painted negatively by the narrative. - Challenges the notion of 'strong' individual leadership - Compare King Robert to leaders in democratic (neoliberal) countries where strength is seen as a positive (Brown, 2014).

heard a rumour?" (s01e05)		
- While King Robert is painted in a negative light, some characters justify his behavior as natural for a king: "It is a terrible thing we must consider, a vile thing. Yet we who presume to rule must sometimes do vile things for the good of the realm." (s01e05) "Honour?! I've got seven kingdoms to rule! One king, seven kingdoms. Do you think honour keeps them in line? Do you think it's an honour that's keeping the	Power	- While some characters do accept the 'natural' order of the world others question it completely: "Where is it written that power is the sole province of the worst? That thrones are only made for the hated and the feared?" (s01e05) - Compare this to how Brown (2014) believes that strong leadership is an illusion - Perhaps the series is edging

peace? - It's fear - fear and blood." (s01e05)		towards a conversation about the very nature of power?
- "When you play the game of thrones, you win…or you die. There is no middle ground" (s01e07)	power	- The competitive nature of statecraft (Davies, 2016) - Neoliberalism is pro individualism and competition
- King Robert acknowledges that he isn't the most powerful man in the country - "Now we've got as many armies as there are men with gold in their purse. And everybody wants	wealth	- Wealth has a huge relation to power in this series - Refer to Philips (2003) for how wealth has affected democracies/ discuss how the united states can

something different. Your father wants to own the world" (s01e05)		be considered a plutocracy
- There is a class divide in this series between lords and peasants - "They die in pain. And they do it… so plump little lords like you can enjoy their summer afternoons in peace and comfort." (s01e03)	Class	- The series immediately demonstrate this divide between lord and peasant as unnatural - Also a comparison can be drawn with neoliberal doctrines that keep people poor as well as punish the poor (Wacquant, 2009) - Lord = top 1 % (Dorling, 2014)

- "Does it? He has neither crown, nor gold, nor favour with the gods. He has a sword, the power of life and death. But if it's swordsmen who rule, why do we pretend kings hold all the power? ..." (s02e03) - The very nature of power in this series is challenged - Kings having to be cruel or fear is an illusion - The power that wealth gives is an illusion	power	- Refer to the idea of "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009), that we can't imagine a system outside the one we live in. - That this idea shields against belief itself - To challenge neoliberalism is to believe that there is an alternative

- Power comes from belief		
- The alternative that the series first provides is altruist kings or queens - "I want you to serve the realm!" (s01e09) - That rather than have a king that serves his own interest, they should serve their people	power	- Refer to Brookes (2016) to explain how leadership is in crisis because of selfish and egotistic individuals - That we should be pushing towards selfless and collective motivations
- Other contenders almost disdain peasants - "You might find it difficult to rule over millions who want you dead.	Class	- Dorling (2014) explains that the wealthiest have a significant negative impact on the population

Half the city will starve when winter comes. The other half will plot to overthrow you." (s02e02)		- That there are some that believe that the poor deserve to be poor - That neoliberalism places misfortunes on the individual not the system at large
- With the altruistic now dead or verging toward tyranny what now? - "Stannis is a killer. The Lannisters are killers. Your father was a killer. Your brother is a killer. Your sons	Power	- The selfish and wealthy still win over the altruistic - Or perhaps those who support neoliberal ideas win over does who don't - Use the example of the 2016 united

will be killers someday. The world is built by killers." (s02e09) - Maybe the problem isn't kings, but the 'Game of Thrones'		states election (Gautney, 2018) - Rather than leaders, start talking about systems
- "…Chaos is a ladder. Many who try to climb it fail and never get to try again. The fall breaks them. And some are given a chance to climb, but they refuse. They cling to the realm of the Gods or love. Illusions. Only the ladder is real. The climb is	power	- Neoliberalism primary discourse is competition (Davies, 2016) - It allocates most of society to the role of loser - Offers few sources of comfort or security

all there is" (s03e06). - The system in this series is built of competition or war - More than that millions die for this system so that one individual can hold on to power only temporarily		
- So how does the series replace the ladder? - "Peace. Prosperity. A land where the powerful do not prey on the powerless… Perhaps. And perhaps we've	power	- Expand on the idea of challenging 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) - Create a world a where selfish leadership is rewarded (Brookes, 2016)

grown so used to horror, we assume there's no other way." (s05e01)		
- Discussion surrounding class continue as the peasants begin to revolt - "Too often the wicked are the wealthiest, beyond the reach of justice." (s05e04) - The narrative demonstrates that when the safety and prosperity of peasants in not secured they will revolt	class	- Compare to the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 (Chomsky, 2012) - How this movement was response to a class divide between the 99 and 1 percent - A divide cause by neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005)

- However, the High Sparrow (leader of this movement) is complicated - He does not necessarily want to solve the class divide but rather climb the ladder himself it would seem - With his death at the hands of the ruling class, it would seem the narrative did not think we offered a solution	class	- What can be said here however is how western countries suppress protests (Wood, 2014) - Dissent has become decreased and limited under neoliberal policies
- "I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break	Power/class/wealth	- This will be broken down with different actions taken by

the wheel." (s05e08) - The narrative focuses its solution around Daenerys, who wants to destroy the system and replace it with something new		Daenerys to break this 'wheel'
- The use of violence to make a better world is questioned in this series - "Violence is a disease. You don't cure a disease by spreading it to more people." (s06e07) - It treads the complexities of	Power/class/wealth	- Protest even violent ones are tied to the progress of democracy (Seferiades & Johnston, 2016) - It could be said that violence between the ruling class and Daenerys (or people trying to

whether violence is a tool of the world they are trying to replace - "The world we need won't be built by men loyal to the world we have. The world we need is a world of mercy… It's not easy to see something that's never been before." (s08e06)		change the world) was inevitable - But Daenerys does take it too far, and could be argued that she was tempted by the power offered by the 'wheel' as she slaughters innocents
- As a result of her actions Daenerys is killed and her followers must break the 'wheel' for her - "Sons of kings can be cruel and	Power/class/wealth	- This seems to me as an obvious contradiction to what the narrative was attempting to discuss - This will have to be expanded

stupid, as you well know. His will never torment us. That is the wheel our queen wanted to break. From now on, rulers will not be born. They will be chosen on this spot by the lords and ladies of Westeros to serve the realm" (s08e06) - The solution to breaking the 'wheel' is giving more power to those who cause pain and suffering in the first place?		more in the discussion section

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