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## Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story? A Marxist Analysis of "Hamilton" and its Relationship to the Broadway Economic System

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**WHO LIVES, WHO DIES, WHO TELLS YOUR STORY? A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF  
*HAMILTON* AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE BROADWAY ECONOMIC SYSTEM**

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HONORS PROJECT

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### **Abstract**

Lin-Manuel Miranda's mega-hit *Hamilton: An American Musical* has been both a critical and academic darling since its premiere in 2015. A historical retelling of America's inception through the eyes of an oft-ignored founding father, the musical weaves together a diverse cast and hip-hop musical stylings in order to tell the story of "America then, as told by America now." While many critics and scholars alike have praised the musical for putting an exciting and accessible twist to American history, others have argued that the musical is not nearly as "revolutionary" as it claims to be. This essay is designed to provide a critical analysis of *Hamilton* against the backdrop of existing scholarship on the musical. Specifically, examines *Hamilton* through the lens of Marxist literary critique in order to answer the question: who does *Hamilton* really represent, and how does this reflect the economic culture of Broadway?

**Keywords:** *Hamilton*, Marxism, Marxist literary theory, alienation, power, history

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### Introduction

There have been few musical theater productions that have become cultural phenomena quite like *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Since its premiere on Broadway's Richard Rodgers Theatre on August 6th, 2015, *Hamilton*'s groundbreaking blend of hip-hop musical numbers and creative depictions of the events surrounding the American Revolution have become popular points of discussion for casual listeners, theater fans, and historical scholars alike. Many have lauded *Hamilton* for its revolutionary race-conscious casting techniques; its blend of hip-hop, rap, R&B, and jazz on a show tune stage; and its accessible framing of historical American politics for a modern audience. While all of these examinations of *Hamilton* are certainly strong evaluations of the work, I believe there is a key critique of the musical that many fans and scholars fail to consider: the role that social and economic class play within *Hamilton* as a text, as a cultural phenomenon, and as a work of historical representation. A Marxist critique of *Hamilton*'s text, in addition to its place within the Broadway economy, is an important angle of scholarly critique that I believe has been underexplored. In this essay, I will break down multiple facets of *Hamilton*'s creation, proliferation, and textual content. I will then analyze how this content has previously been explored by scholars before outlining the ways in which their past scholarship points to a lack of class analysis. After a thorough literature review, I will examine how Marxist theories on literary critique can be applied to the text of *Hamilton* as well as how such critiques frame *Hamilton* within the capitalist economy of Broadway. In essence, this essay is designed to address the following research question: who does *Hamilton* really represent, and how does this reflect the economic culture of Broadway?

### **The History of *Hamilton: An American Musical***

#### **Summary**

*Hamilton: An American Musical* is a 2015 sung-through musical with music, lyrics, and book written by playwright and performer Lin-Manuel Miranda. *Hamilton* tells the story of the oft-sidelined American founding father Alexander Hamilton (played by Miranda in the musical's original run) as he makes a name for himself in his new nation. The musical follows Hamilton as he immigrates to New York City from the Caribbean and forms alliances and rivalries with other notable historical figures such as Marquis de Lafayette (Daveed Diggs), Hercules Mulligan (Okieriete Onaodowan), George Washington (Christopher Jackson), Thomas Jefferson (Daveed Diggs), and Aaron Burr (Leslie Odom Jr.); in fact, Burr—Hamilton's primary antagonist throughout the narrative—acts as the musical's de facto narrator. Over the course of the musical's first of two acts, Hamilton marries the wealthy Angelica Schuyler (Phillipa Soo) and has a son Phillip (Anthony Ramos), assists Washington on the battlefields of the Revolutionary War, and is selected to become the first Secretary of the Treasury under now-president Washington upon the release of his draft of what would become the American constitution, *The Federalist Papers*. During the play's second act, Hamilton engages in a series of debates with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson regarding Hamilton's proposed financial plans for the newfound America as well as America's role as neutral party in a conflict between France and Britain. Under the stress of competition against Jefferson, Hamilton begins an affair with a woman named Maria Reynolds (Jasmine Cephas Jones), whose husband henceforth begins to blackmail him. Burr, jealous and angered by Hamilton's political success, allies himself with Jefferson and James Madison (Okieriete Onaodowan) to discredit Hamilton in future political engagements. This plan proves successful after Hamilton is removed from his position as

Secretary of the Treasury under President John Adams, as Burr, Jefferson, and Madison unearth the blackmail paid towards Maria Reynolds' husband. In a desperate attempt to protect his academic and political legacy, Hamilton publishes *The Reynolds Pamphlet*, a document which brings to light his affair with Maria Reynolds and subsequently destroys his marriage to Angelica Schuyler. This behavior, along with Hamilton's endorsement of Jefferson over Burr in the 1800 election, leads to animosity between the two men that results in a duel during which Burr ultimately shoots and kills Hamilton. The musical closes out its second and final act with a reflection on the role of legacy and memory in history. This summary was included because prior to any further exploration of the musical, one must first be provided a brief summary in order to clearly understand the narrative which is being dissected.

### **Creation, Inspiration, & Funding**

In order to properly examine the text of *Hamilton* in a broader context, we must first gain a clear understanding of how and why *Hamilton* came to be. *Hamilton* began its life as a hip-hop mixtape by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Coming off the success of his first major Broadway production *In the Heights*, Miranda was inspired to write *Hamilton* after reading a copy of Ron Chernow's biography on the eponymous founding father (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 32). In particular, Miranda found Chernow's biography inspiring because he identified with Alexander Hamilton's experience as a Puerto Rican immigrant, stating that Hamilton's immigrant status "is the prototype for millions of men and women who followed him, and continue to arrive today" (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 15). Given this inspiration, Miranda's decision to pursue race-conscious casting for his production becomes clear. Miranda often summarized this choice by stating that *Hamilton* "is a story about America then, told by America now" (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 33).

*Hamilton* was brought to stage by a 2014 enhancement deal at New York City's nonprofit Public Theater. Enhancement deals work as a form of two-way collaboration between theater producers and nonprofit theaters: the producers are able to put their show on stage for a fraction of the cost of a traditional commercial venue—in the case of *Hamilton*, \$1.7 million compared to \$12.5 million; meanwhile, the theaters are able to stay afloat through an influx of new productions. This partnership between *Hamilton*'s producers and the Public Theater proved to be highly lucrative, with *Hamilton* making the transition to the Richard Rodgers Theatre in 2015 after having made \$32 million in advance ticket sales (Gerard, 2015).

### ***Hamilton*'s Reception on the Broadway Stage & Broader Culture**

As evidenced by *Hamilton*'s advance ticket sales, the musical was quickly becoming a Broadway juggernaut. As of 2016 *Hamilton*'s Richard Rodgers Theatre production was bringing in roughly \$600,000 a week in profit (Paulson & Gelles, 2016). This popularity on stage would soon translate to offstage success as well. During the 2016 Tony Awards *Hamilton* would go on to win 11 awards, nearly winning the title of most awarded musical in Tony Awards history ("Hamilton Dominates", 2016). The original cast recording of the musical's soundtrack debuted at number twelve on the *Billboard* 200 chart on October 17, 2015 with the second-largest sales debut for a cast recording since 1991 (Caulfield, 2015). *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda would also be highly lauded, going on to win a 2015 MacArthur genius grant for his work on the musical (Bohem, 2015). All of this success would eventually lead to the publication of a filmed stage performance on the streaming service Disney+ on July 3, 2020 (Spangler, 2020).

*Hamilton*'s impact would continue to spread outside of the realm of theater and musical accolades; the musical also became a huge success in education circles as well. One of the most prominent examples of *Hamilton*'s impact on academic culture is the creation of the Hamilton

Education Program. This partnership between the musical's producers and The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History "is an in-person program for Title I-eligible high schools [...] to integrate Alexander Hamilton and the Founding Era into classroom studies and then see the musical" (2021). This high level of interest in *Hamilton* would prove to be nearly as historic as the narrative on which it is based, with the musical joining a small class of musicals to have grossed over \$1 billion dollars in profits over the course of its run (Chmielewski, 2020).

Perhaps one of the most prominent reasons that *Hamilton* gained such popularity is its cultural relevance. With its inception and introduction of race-conscious casting in the Obama era to its rise in popularity during the Trump era, *Hamilton* seemed to ebb and flow with the surrounding political landscape. *Forbes* writer Dawn Chmielewski (2020) expands upon this idea further, stating that it was not just political relevance that led to *Hamilton*'s status but its connection to the citizens within the political system as well:

*Hamilton* offers something for everyone. Progressives embrace Alexander Hamilton's triumphant immigrant's journey (the lyric, "immigrants: we get the job done" would spark applause during performances). Conservatives love the classic bootstrap-tale of an orphan with a relentless work ethic who rises to become the nation's first Secretary of the Treasury. Culture fiends devour its street-smart voice and contemporary soundtrack.

Chmielewski's interpretation of *Hamilton* is not only a clear encapsulation on what made the musical so popular among the masses, but also alludes to the reasoning for the musical's importance in academic circles. *Hamilton* is important to scholars of history, art, and American culture because it represents a myriad of ways of understanding American history and one's place within it. Of course, just because there



are so many ways of interpreting a text does not mean that key trends do not develop between researchers and academics.

### **Scholars on *Hamilton***

Much of the previous scholarship on *Hamilton* has examined the production through one of two lenses: *Hamilton* as a historical and cultural reflection, and *Hamilton*'s relationship to Broadway and musical theater in general. Past scholarship contains both positive and negative reflections on the role of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical, and often highlights a number of key subjects like race in casting, historical accuracy, and art as historical narrative.

### ***Hamilton* as Historical & Cultural Reflection**

Many academics, particularly historians, have focused on *Hamilton* as a lens through which to examine America's relationship to its past, from both an educational and sociocultural standpoint. Much has been said in academia regarding the role of *Hamilton* as a cultural icon of modern American aesthetic, artistic, and sociopolitical values. Many historians hold differing views on the value of *Hamilton* as a historical narrative. Some claim that the popularity of *Hamilton*, despite its historical inaccuracies, is still a powerful and necessary tool for making historical theory and narrative more accessible to a wider audience (Carp, 2017, p. 294), while others state that while *Hamilton* is an important artistic artifact, it cannot be approached with any level of historical vigor due to an over-glamourization and simplification of historical narrative (Isenberg, 2017, p. 303).

As evidenced, much of the conflict between historians on the viability of *Hamilton* as historical and artistic artifact has to do with interpretations of the validity of narrative adjustments within the musical that lead to historical inaccuracies. In order to structure the story of *Hamilton* into a more compelling narrative, Miranda took multiple liberties in regard to

historical fact surrounding Alexander Hamilton's life—both by his own volition and seemingly under reverence for Chernow's biography on the founding father. Many of the more critical analyses of the musical come from historians who take particular issue with Miranda's methodology and execution of adjustments to *Hamilton*'s historical narrative. For instance, historians have critiqued the “smoothing” of Alexander Hamilton's personality and behavior within the musical, stating that “Miranda relied too heavily on Chernow, who exaggerated Alexander Hamilton's antislavery credentials and [...] (even celebrated) some of his more militaristic, elitist, and antidemocratic inclinations” (Carp. 2017, p. 289). This decision has been marked as a potential means of catalyst for Hamilton's character into the current national spotlight; if this modern Hamilton is meant to represent both “America then” and “America now,” it will be far more palatable for progressive audiences to turn the other cheek to the historical Hamilton's misdeeds in favor of his charismatic narrative counterpart (Isenberg, 2017, p. 297). Other such historical inaccuracies include the musical's relative ignorance to the issue of slavery while antislavery receives far more bandwidth. Outside of a single reference to Thomas Jefferson's slave Sally Hemmings, there is no reference or depiction of slavery in the musical. Some historians have described this erasure as “historically inappropriate” given the musical's multiracial casting (Monteiro, 2018, p. 64-66). Furthermore, issue has also been taken with the role in which Aaron Burr has been cast in the musical, with claims that his relegation to a fairly stereotypical villain arc greatly exaggerated his relationship with Hamilton and the role they played in one another's' lives (Carp, 2017, p. 290). In particular, historians have pointed out the dissonance between Miranda's depiction of Hamilton and Burr's final duel as a direct result of the election of 1800, which historically played a far less important role in the Hamilton-Burr

relationship and a far more important role in the messy relationship between Hamilton and John Adams (Isenberg, 2017, p. 301; Owen, 2017, p. 511).

On the other hand, there are historians who see such historical inaccuracies as an additional teaching point wrapped in the broader accessible package of *Hamilton*. Historian Benjamin Carp (2017) has argued that while “*Hamilton* may well be an entree to the Revolutionary era for some, [...] the show strongly argues that it shouldn’t be the last stop on the viewer’s journey” (p. 294). This view reflects a method of historical interpretation dubbed “organicism,” which states that the American revolution, and by extension other parts of history, was a flawed attempt at reaching monumental ideological goals (Schocket, 2018, p. 168). If, in that case, *Hamilton* is designed to be a reflection on organicism in American history, then the historical inaccuracies on which portions of the play’s narrative is based are rendered moot. Historian Joanne Freeman (2017) describes this process as a “de-familiarization” of American history and the founding fathers; by recontextualizing the stories of old, wealthy, white men through the lens of modern, youthful people of color, *Hamilton* is better able to break through “the mythic haze that clouds our understanding of the Founding” (p. 262). In essence, the omissions and alterations of history within *Hamilton* work to recontextualize how history can be remembered. This method of rewriting history through a traditionally marginalized lens can be described as “revisionist” history which was popularized by historian Howard Zinn around the 1980s with the publication of *A People’s History of the United States* (Timm, 2017. p. 199-200).

### ***Hamilton* as Broadway Musical**

*Hamilton*’s relationship to Broadway as a platform, as well as previous Broadway productions, is also a popular focus for scholarly critique. Historian Brian Herrera argues that while *Hamilton*’s popularity has caused the work to grow beyond the boundaries of the

“Broadway Bubble”, its origins as a stage musical are of the foremost importance when attempting to understand the musical’s politics and production decisions. For instance, Herrera states that while *Hamilton* positions itself as a revolutionary new addition to the Broadway pantheon, it is instead a “melting pot” of the many musicals and historical narratives which came before it (2018, p. 225). This is due to *Hamilton*’s connection to well-worn narratives surrounding presidential and political popularity. Herrera posits that *Hamilton* did in fact modernize the concept of presidential narrative through its strong connections to the Obama presidency; the framing of “America then” by “America now” against the backdrop of a historical presidency allows for clearer connection between the audiences and the historical narrative of the musical through the modernization of narrative theater tropes. Another critique about the musical posited by communication scholar Valerie Lynn Schrader (2019) states that *Hamilton*’s reuse and recontextualization of traditional Broadway musical techniques works to create a public memory that allows for clearer interpretation and application of moral messages (2019, p. 261). Specifically, Schrader claims that the recreation of Alexander Hamilton’s life and history through a modern and diverse musical theater production allows for easier identification between audiences and himself. Not only does this creation of a public memory allow for the continued legacy of Hamilton as desired by the character within the musical, it also provides a contained context through which audiences can live out their fantasies through identification with the protagonist (Schrader, 2019, p. 271). This method of moral education is particularly appropriate for musical theater, Schrader suggests, because it allows for a combination of different viewpoints, emotions, and desires for different audience members to connect with than other forms of historical media.

While there is certainly merit to scholarship from the above viewpoints, there is a noticeable gap in the academic research surrounding *Hamilton*. Much of the existing scholarship surrounding *Hamilton* places great importance on the musical's relationship to historical events, race representation, and artistic revolution in the world of musical theater through its creation, narrative, and environment; however, very little scholarship touches on these factors surrounding *Hamilton* and their relation to class. Given this, an examination of Marxist theory and critique will provide an important new lens through which to examine *Hamilton*'s narrative and its relationship to broader Broadway economics and American culture.

### **Marxist Theory & Critique**

In order to properly deconstruct *Hamilton* using Marxist critique, the primary ideologies and mechanisms of Marxist theory must first be defined both within historical and artistic contexts.

#### **Introduction to Marxist Thought**

Marxist critique is named for its foundational philosopher, Karl Marx. Marx is a German activist whose writings on anthropology, history, and economics have made him one of the most prominent ideological revolutionaries in modern history. Perhaps Marx's most notable work is *The Communist Manifesto*, which was written with his longtime collaborator Friedrich Engels in 1848. *The Communist Manifesto*, alongside later writings like *Das Kapital*, outlined Marx's main ideological foci: the nature of humanity as it relates to economic systems, the role of class as purveyor of societal ills, and the problems with capitalism as a societal framework. Marxist economic and social thought sees class and other systemic structures, especially those arising from capitalism, as particularly potent purveyors of alienation. According to Marx, much of capitalist modern society is split into two groups which stem from the feudalist social system of

medieval Europe: the bourgeoisie, or the ruling class; and the proletariat, or the working class. The bourgeoisie control the means of production, such as resources, whereas the proletariat are the economic workhorses that produce societal goods and wealth. Because the proletariat are not in control of the systems in which they work or the resources and wealth which they create, Marx sees them as alienated from their work and, by extension, their truest human essence. However, modern capitalism continues to create a broader and broader socioeconomic gap between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, a gap which Marx believes can only be addressed through proletariat revolution and a subsequent shift to a communist society (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 15-18; Wolff & Leopold, 2021). In essence, Marx's theories can be distilled down to the ideas about alienation and power, specifically alienation of the classes through economic systems that create power imbalances in favor of the ruling class.

### **Foundations of Marxist Theory in the Arts**

Marxist critique has been expanded and adapted since the time of Marx and Engels, including as a form of literary and artistic critique. The application of Marxist theory to works of art is an important part to understand when examining the world through a Marxist lens, as art is a part of the societal superstructure which, according to Marx, works to create and perpetuate the economic base of society (Wolff & Leopold, 2021).

One such development regarding Marxist thought and art creation is the idea of the "culture industry". Proposed by philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", the culture industry is the system of artistic creation and disbursement born from the necessity of commodification in capitalist societies. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is designed to play two major roles in society: first, to create a system in which all art and entertainment is able

to be commodified and therefore alienated from its original creator; second, to maintain the capitalist status quo through the elimination of art as means of expression. The culture industry works to perpetuate the submission of the masses without raising too much discussion due to the illusion of choice and diversity; because most consumed art and entertainment has the veneer of difference, individuals are lulled into the idea that media continues to share the stories of the masses rather than perpetuate the needs of the capitalist system (2020, p. 103).

Of course, not every Marxist philosopher holds quite the same view on the role of industrialization in the arts and entertainment industries. Prominent philosopher Walter Benjamin argued in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that mankind’s ability to mechanize the creation and distribution of art could actually be considered a democratic process. While Benjamin appears to believe that this democratized process is reflective of Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry in that mechanical reproduction of art reflects the sociopolitical environment of the time in which it is produced, he disagrees that it necessarily works as an opiate for the masses. Rather, Benjamin believes that reproduced art has the power to carry any political messaging, not just that of the proletariat, and is therefore a powerful communicative tool (1969, p. 2-20). Another important facet of Benjamin’s theory of art in modern society is the idea of the “aura”, or the authenticity and environmental situation associated with an original work of art. Because the aura is the set of circumstances surrounding the creation of an original work, it is not transferable to reproductions and therefore causes such copies to lose specific spiritual meaning (Benjamin, 1969, p. 4). However, Benjamin does not necessarily see this loss of aura as a total loss in artistic copies; rather, he sees it as a tool of new media that allows for the dissemination of political thought discussed earlier. Benjamin believes the power of media such as photography and film lies in the fact that there are no true

“originals”, as each medium is designed to be infinitely reproducible— thereby making them perfect conduits for political discourse (Benjamin, 1969, p.10). This ideological stance on the role of reproduction in the arts represents the key difference between Benjamin and his predecessors Adorno and Horkheimer: because Benjamin believes that politics are best communicated in reproduced works, the meaning of a work of art lies in its method of consumption, not in its method of production where Adorno and Horkheimer believe it lies.

Given this background on the evolution of Marxist theory in application to the arts, the scope of Marxist artistic critique can further be narrowed to focus on literary discourse. This ability to narrow the scope of critique, particularly Marxist critique, is important when working towards textual application as “Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’[...] its aim is to explain the literary work more fully” (Eagleton, 1989, p. 3). Therefore, in order to properly apply Marxist theory to a text one must be careful not to examine said text as a simple commodity of culture, but as a work of art emblematic of a specific space in time. To gain a clearer understanding of the methods of application for Marxist literary critique, one may turn to notable cultural theorist Terry Eagleton. Eagleton is a Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University and a strong proponent of historicism, or the view that Marxist critique of literature must examine a work within the ideological and historical context in which it was written (1989, p. xi). According to Eagleton, the examination of literature is a tool which can be used to better understand an era’s dominant social mentality and ideological norms. These norms appear in works not just in terms of theme and narrative structure, but also in their style of writing, use of imagery and form (Eagleton, 1989, p. 5-6). Eagleton further explains that such reproductions of culture in literary texts are not mere reflections of a specific society or ideology, but rather a transformation of ideology through the act of labor. This transformation is an



essential component to examine when conducting Marxist analysis of a work; because literature is an active agent of ideology spread, the transformation of society in said work can either discuss or obscure the power imbalances of said society (1989, p. 48). In essence, Eagleton's theories on Marxist literary critique can be summed up as an examination of a literary work through the lens of its associated sociopolitical contexts. This type of applied literary critique can be broadly approached in similar terms to the Marxist ideology on which it is based: Marxist literary critique focuses on the systems of power imbalance and alienation present in the context of literary creation in order to better gain an understanding of the work's narrative, its author's motivations, and the role of its audience.

### ***Hamilton & Marxist Critique***

Now armed with a thorough understanding of the function and ideology of Marxist critique, we can now apply said theories to *Hamilton*. Prior to beginning this analysis, however, an important note must be made: the following critique of *Hamilton* is not meant to reduce the cultural importance of the musical, particularly its relationship to marginalized communities and people of color. It would be impossible to discuss any component of *Hamilton*'s structure and legacy without acknowledging the profoundly positive impact it has had on so many individuals and communities. As a white woman, I have been provided privileges of seeing myself represented throughout my country's history that many of my fellow Americans have not. Therefore, it would be highly inappropriate of me to suggest that just because this musical may not address specific socioeconomic and class critiques, it is somehow a lesser cultural product. As stated by historian Andrew Schocket, "despite [*Hamilton*'s] conventional story, it allows for people of color to see themselves as belonging to the founding and vice versa" (2017, p. 269). The goal of the following critiques of the musical are simply designed to expand existing

scholarly themes surrounding *Hamilton* into the realm of Marxist critique. It is certainly important, and often necessary, to critique beloved cultural works in order to gain a better understanding of their ideologies and relationship to broader societal structures.

### **The Importance of Race: *Hamilton*'s Foundations & the Obama Administration**

Before applying Marxist theory to the text of *Hamilton*, the environment and methods through which the musical came to be must also be examined. The earliest performance of a song that would eventually become the opening number of *Hamilton* occurred on May 12, 2009 at "An Evening of Poetry, Music, and Spoken Word," one of the first arts and culture events of the Obama administration (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 14). In his book *Hamilton: The Revolution*, Lin-Manuel Miranda explains that his rationale behind choosing to debut a draft of "Alexander Hamilton" to the crowd that night was the connection he viewed between his legacy, the legacy of then-president Barack Obama, and Alexander Hamilton. Miranda places each of their statuses as the children of immigrants at the forefront of his decision: "13% of the population [of America] is foreign-born [...]you could just look and listen around the East Room that night, and listen to the performance, and consider what made it possible" (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 15).

This physical and philosophical connection between Miranda, Obama, and Hamilton was not only present in the initial release of the musical, but within its structures as well. Perhaps one of the most famous aspects of *Hamilton*'s production is its race-conscious casting, wherein the vast majority of the cast, including all of the main cast, is played by African-American or Latinx actors. While there were undoubtedly a multitude of reasons why Miranda and the other showrunners decided to consciously cast people of color in the roles of the founding fathers, the

fact that the musical was initially created and staged during the Obama administration likely plays no small part in this decision. Miranda and his team have stated time and time again that *Hamilton* “is a story about America then, told by America now” (2016, p. 33), or in some cases, “[a story of] Obama’s America” (Monteiro, 2017, p. 61). In the wake of the election of America’s first black president, Miranda’s decision to bring what seemed to be an increase in diversity in American politics to the stage and, by extension, to American history.

But while this decision has been lauded for bringing diversity and inclusivity to the Broadway stage, *Hamilton*’s casting may not be as progressive as initially thought upon further investigation. Similar to many critiques from the left regarding the Obama administration, *Hamilton* continues to promise progressive reform and change of historical ills— a promise which feels far more salient when presented by a person of color. However, in the case of both the Obama administration and *Hamilton*, said promises for widespread reform were often undercut through the continued perpetuation of the same exploitative system they wanted to change. In the case of the Obama presidency, which undoubtedly made massive strides on issues such as diversity and inclusion, climate change, and the American economic system, it continued to alienate American citizens and the executive branch like his white predecessors through issues like drone warfare, surveillance, and immigrant deportations (Belmonte, as qtd. by Staff, 2017). In the case of *Hamilton*, though race-conscious casting decisions were undoubtedly powerful in making American history more accessible to those who have previously been left out of the history books, the musical’s relative lack of acknowledgement of American’s horrific past against African Americans and other people of color as well as the veritable erasure of any historical character of color from the narrative simply works to perpetuate the same exploitative “great white man” story of history under the guise of progressivism. While it would be harmful

to suggest that no powerful good arose from either the Obama presidency or *Hamilton*, it is important to examine the former's influence on the latter's conceptualization of revolution and representation, however subconscious said influence may have been.

### ***Hamilton's Text & Narrative Dissonance***

In addition to the environment surrounding its inception, the text of *Hamilton* is also fitting for Marxist critique. As alluded to before, one of the primary reasons *Hamilton* has been lauded as “revolutionary” is due to its use of race-conscious casting. By very deliberately casting each of the founding fathers as black or Latino men, Lin-Manuel Miranda makes the claim that people of color can reclaim the parts of history from which they have been so often excluded through the text of his musical. While this move is quite powerful when taken at face value, further inspection of this decision brings to light troubling power dynamics otherwise ignored by the narrative's text. Essentially, *Hamilton* focuses on integrating racial diversity in its cast at the expense of sharing the stories of historically marginalized individuals, thereby continuing to perpetuate the same exploitative version of history with what essentially amounts to lip service to progressive representation and change. One such way this occurs in the musical is through *Hamilton's* relative lack of discussion of slavery or historical people of color. Past discussions on the musical have stated that the race-conscious casting in *Hamilton* was chosen to depict “an idealized America resting just outside of history, an aspirational vision of what the nation could be” (McAllister, 2017, p. 283). However, given the framing of the text as a revolutionary retelling of American history, very little is done to revolutionize what kind of story is being made. With little more than passing mentions to slavery over its duration, the musical effectively erases the history faced by the potential ancestors of the musical's black cast members. There are

no historical people of color present in the musical, even though about 14% of the population of New York City—the musical’s primary setting—was black in the late 1700s (Monteiro, 2017, p. 62). Several instances where historical people of color could have been included over the course of the musical, such as scenes during the Revolutionary War, ignore the role that hundreds of black people played in the formation of American history to continue to share the hyper-focused stories of a handful of historically white individuals. Throughout the musical, the existence of people of color, and more specifically black people, is largely only discussed when their presence works to elevate the stories of major white historical figures. This component of the musical can be interpreted through a version of historical retelling called ‘Founder’s Chic’, a term often used in historian circles to describe the recent trend towards focused and extensive biographies on America’s founding fathers’ lives, often used as vessels for the biographer’s personal politics (Schocket, 2015, p. 50). Given that *Hamilton* is based off of biographer’s Ron Chernow’s book on the titular founding father, combined with Lin-Manuel Miranda’s admiration for and identification with said founding father, it is no wonder that the musical works to scrub allusions of Hamilton’s racial ills from its narrative.

### ***Hamilton* & Characterization**

Alongside the musical’s text, the characterization of Alexander Hamilton is also worthy of Marxist critique. Much of the musical’s characterization of its historical figures continues the “Founders Chic” tradition of working within a historical framework known as “Great Man” history, which posits that the great deeds of history were accomplished by a small number of important men. While *Hamilton* continuously attempts to frame its eponymous protagonist through the lens of community membership and group identity (such as the continued referencing to Hamilton as an immigrant from the Caribbean), it tends towards the same “Great

Man” narrative as its predecessors by scrubbing away many historical flaws of its protagonist; In the words of Jefferson scholar Annette Gordon-Reed, “It’s not Hamilton [who we see in the musical]. It’s an idea of who we would like Hamilton to be” (as qtd. By Hogeland, 2018, p. 21).

In the case of the musical’s title character, this historical framing appears in several ways.

Firstly, the musical’s depiction of Hamilton frames him as a staunch abolitionist, with many songs referring to Hamilton and his compatriots as “a bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists” (Miranda, 2015, 10:20). However, the historical Hamilton was significantly less outspoken on the issue than his fictional counterpart. Historical evidence points to Hamilton being portrayed as more of an abolitionist in comparison to slaveholding founders such as Jefferson. Hamilton was a prominent early nationalist, and as a result was indifferent to the passage of legislature which engrained slavery into the nation’s founding if it meant he was able to pass his political and economic goals (Isenberg, 2017, p. 300; Hogeland, 2018, p. 28).

Secondly, the musical places weighty emphasis on Hamilton’s status as an immigrant—an idea pulled directly from Lin-Manuel Miranda’s primary inspiration for his musical, Ron Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton*. Miranda has stated that Chernow’s framing of the founding father was particularly impactful to him because it was reminiscent of his father’s immigration— “an enduring archetype: the obscure immigrant who comes to America, re-creates himself, and succeeds despite a lack of proper birth and breeding” (Hogeland, 2018, p. 24). However, the real Hamilton’s “immigration” story does not mirror America’s modern ethos on the subject; he arrived on pre-American land in a similar fashion to other early American colonialists such as Thomas Jefferson (Hogeland, 2018, p. 27). Given Miranda’s apparent connection to the story of Hamilton, it is no wonder that he would go on to make his musical’s narrative one that centered the man’s strength and perseverance over a measured representation

of his relationship to the historical environment in which he lived. This framing is problematic because it directly contradicts the musical's assertion that it is providing a modernized telling of American history.

Thirdly, the musical's framing of Hamilton as an inherently revolutionary character comes in contrast with modern understandings of the term, particularly as it relates to Marxist critique. Though the musical attempts to approach historical retelling through a more progressive lens, its reliance on historical tropes such as "Great Man" history essentially work to negate any surface-level allusions to an updated history.

### **The Broadway Economic System & Distribution**

It is important to remember that a Marxist critique of *Hamilton* must not merely exist within the world of the text. Because Marxist theory is so heavily based on the relationships between individuals and their socioeconomic systems, *Hamilton* must also be examined in the context of its broader environment, i.e., Broadway. To specifically understand the ways *Hamilton* continues to alienate marginalized peoples in pursuit of elite consumption, one must examine the musical's relationship to the capitalist enterprise of Broadway.

### **An Introduction to the Broadway Economic System**

To understand the economy of Broadway, one must first examine its history and foundations. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus will be primarily on the advent of the modern American musical. Modern conceptualizations of Broadway, while potentially associated with the proliferation of various theater districts across the nation, is most heavily associated with the Broadway Theatre district in Midtown Manhattan, New York City. The Broadway district holds 41 distinct theatre venues which, alongside London's West End theatres, make up the English-speaking world's premier class of live theater. Of course, Broadway is not

merely limited to its physical location; just as important is the impact of American musical theater history that would lead to the establishment of such a powerful theatre district.

Much of what is considered standard for American musical theater arrived alongside European settlers to the Americas in the early eighteenth century. These foundational productions took the form of ballad operas, which were deeply associated with socioeconomic ties to aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. The new America continued the perpetuation of the “bourgeois public sphere,” a spiritual predecessor to modern neoliberal capitalism. Not only did the “bourgeois public sphere” work to spread the economic ideals of the time, it also worked via the proliferation of moralistic and political literature and media publication (Walsh & Platt, 2003, p. 13-14). From here, American musical theater would continue to evolve; from burlesque to vaudeville, revue to musical comedy, the art form which would come to be understood as the modern Broadway musical picked up new and distinctive traits such as connections to popular culture, increased prominence of both song and dance, and the satirical or transformative depictions of the modern society (Walsh & Platt, 2003, p. 18-45). Each of these traits would eventually culminate in the 1866 hit production of *The Black Crook*, a production long considered to be the first modern musical. Not only did *The Black Crook*'s blend of melodrama and operetta provide the textual foundations for the modern musical landscape, but it also represented a physical shift towards the physical location of Broadway that is world renowned today (Wollman, 2018, p. 190). In the early part of the 20th century, much of the establishment of what would come to be known as Broadway-style performances were influenced by black culture, such as the musical genres of ragtime and jazz (Walsh & Platt, 2003, p. 64). The blend of musical stylings from early white American immigrants with those of black Americans would continue to influence both the sound and politics of musical theater. As America progressed



through the First and Second World Wars, so too did American musical theater change with the times. This era would bring about the premiere of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*.

*Oklahoma!* Is an important touchstone in the development of musical theater because it represents the nationalistic ideology that was commonplace in American economic and political systems at the time, such as intense patriotism and nationalism (Walsh & Platt, 2003, p. 96).

Musical theater would continue to evolve in the wake of Rodgers and Hammerstein, shifting from the introduction of rock musicals to the era of the 1990s and 2000s mega-musical. These eras were marked by a combination of auteur-style creators such as Andrew Lloyd Weber and the introduction of the corporate musical with Disney's adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* (Walsh & Platt, 2003, p. 159). Of course, not everyone has been so grateful for the apparent industrialization of the Broadway musical:

Many have accused Broadway of willfully abdicating its pride of place as the generator of serious work, and continue to rail against it for deferring to the sure thing rather than the great experiment [...] Yet Broadway is still a critical component of the cultural landscape [...] it provides an essential boost to the financial health of New York City [...bringing] in approximately \$4.4 billion to New York's economy [as of 2004] (Adler, 2004, p. 2-3).

Nevertheless, it is the era of the mega-musical which leads into contemporary musical theater on the Broadway stage.

### **Broadway, Capitalism, and Power**

Theater scholar and historian Steven Adler wrote that "Broadway's evolution must be understood in the context of artistic and economic forces that play out in a global arena" (2004, p. 29). Therefore, given Broadway's deep ties to the American bourgeoisie described earlier in

this essay, it is no wonder that so much of Broadway's economic system relies so heavily on capitalist ideology and behavior. In fact, much of the modern economic structure of Broadway is representative of the struggle for power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat described throughout Marxist theory.

One prominent way the economic systems of Broadway continue to perpetuate capitalist ideals and power systems is through its prohibitively high costs— for both producers and audiences. On the production side, Broadway shows are typically financed by wealthy patrons such as investors, philanthropists, movie studios, theatre owners, and the like (Goldberg, 2011). If producers are interested in putting on a show in one of Broadway's 41 theatres, they have to be able to pay rental fees which can range anywhere from \$200,000 to \$2 million out of the production's gross revenue (Goldberg, 2011). Because costs for putting on a mainstage production can be so high, producers with less mainstream productions may be forced to either begin their show's run off-Broadway or adjust their work to be more suitable for a broader audience. Broadway producers, if unwilling to risk the cost of putting on a unique but potential flop, therefore tend towards revivals of classic musicals. This preference for the tried-and-true musical then continues to perpetuate the difficulty of Broadway access for smaller, artsier productions; as more and more revivals are put on for fear of losing audiences, fewer stages are available for more unique shows, which frightens producers into putting on more revivals in a near-endless cycle (Adler, 2004, p. 6-7). Furthermore, the clear advantage of secure funding is granted to producers working within a corporate system, such as in the production of a musical based on a major motion picture (Adler, 2004, p. 143).

This increased commercialization of Broadway theatre not only impacts the cost of production for the producers, but also increases the cost of attendance for audience members.

Because the costs associated with putting on a Broadway show, such as theatre rent, salaries, and marketing, have increased beyond the standard inflation rate, the cost of tickets has also had to rise exponentially to turn a modicum of profit (Adler, 2004, p. 152). Furthermore, increased ticket prices can cyclically impact the cost of a production as well. According to Phillip J. Smith, president of the Shubert Organization, if a production's tickets cost premium prices, then the production must deliver "much more scenic effects, much greater costumes, which is all driving up the costs" (as qtd. By Adler, 2004, p. 161-162). In addition, Broadway has gone through a shift in recent years in terms of audience demographics, from artsy New York locals to the monetarily established, "middle American", family-oriented tourist. In 1980, the average Broadway audience was made up of about 60% native New Yorkers; in the year 2000, this number dipped to 40% (Adler, 2004, p. 12). This demographic shift required an increased number of more accessible narratives, thereby continuing to grow the dominance of family-friendly media juggernauts like Disney on the Broadway stage (Adler, 2004, p. 11).

The economic system of production and consumption on Broadway provides a prime example of Marxist theory of the arts in action. The cyclical nature of Broadway production which is reliant on funding from investors and corporations clearly exemplifies Adorno and Horkheimer's theory on the culture industry. The producers, alienated from the fruits of their labor due to skyrocketing rent and production costs, must turn to wealthy benefactors in order to create art. However, because the bourgeoisie class holds power in artistic, economic, and political circles, their influence through funding can alter what kind of productions make it to the stage. The continued proliferation of tried-and-true musical classics throughout Broadway works, as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, to maintain and redistribute the sociopolitical ideology of the elite in an unassuming and easily digestible package.

### ***Hamilton* & Broadway**

Now armed with a clearer understanding of the history and economic background of Broadway, the environment of those New York theaters can be examined as backdrop for further Marxist critique of *Hamilton*. For the purposes of this examination, the focus on Broadway and musical theater economics will be limited to discussions of *Hamilton*'s original cast run in New York City, with minor discussions on other means of distribution such as touring shows, streaming video, and audio recordings.

Because of *Hamilton*'s immense popularity, it is somewhat of a unique case study regarding the relationship between productions and Broadway in terms of financing and commerce. *Hamilton* was immensely popular with audiences from the very beginning. As a for instance, Broadway productions typically do not present touring performances until several years into a successful play's run (if any happen at all); within two years of its initial release at The Richard Rodgers Theatre, *Hamilton* had gained standing productions in both Chicago and San Francisco among other national tour locations (Herrera, 2018, p. 222). A This high demand would eventually lead to dramatically inflated prices; at the height of the *Hamilton* fervor in 2016, a single ticket could cost \$176 from a primary purchase point (Paulson & Gelles, 2016). Given the high demand for *Hamilton* tickets nationwide, it is no wonder that several extraneous means of procuring them have gained a sizable market share of ticket sales. Roughly 20% of annual *Hamilton* ticket sales occur through third-party purchasing systems. As a cross-section of annual revenue, scalped *Hamilton* tickets pull in approximately \$60 million dollars per year. Resold tickets could sell for up to \$872 on third-party sites like StubHub or over \$5,000 on less moderated sites such as Craigslist (Paulson & Gelles, 2016). These types of price-gouging techniques are clear encapsulations of how the economics of the culture industry play out

throughout Broadway. The skyrocketing of ticket prices allows for sales leaders within the market to shift conceptions of supply and demand, thereby increasing the hype surrounding a piece of media through a narrowing of access channels. Furthermore, the proliferation of third-party sites allows for further separation between the bourgeoisie, or those who can both set the prices and can afford to go; and the proletariat, or those whose consumption is at the will of the capitalist elite. This structure is especially salient given *Hamilton*'s reputation as a "revolutionary" production. Though programs like The *Hamilton* Education program provide access to the musical to underprivileged students, large swaths of the marginalized individuals whom the musical claims to represent are alienated from a retelling of their own history due to capitalist pricing systems.

The proliferation of both official and unofficial semi-reproductions or spin-offs of the musical production plays an interesting part in defining *Hamilton* as a product of the culture industry. Despite *Hamilton*'s incredible popularity, it had no televised or filmed viewing option until the summer of 2020. Instead, dedicated fans who wished to partake in the musical's fervor without seeing the production latched on to a combination of official and unofficial spin-offs. As discussed earlier in this essay, *Hamilton*'s cast recording made its debut at number twelve on the Billboard 200 list (Caulfield, 2015). In addition, the *Hamilton* team has provided additional content for fans who may not be able to view a live production through a program called "Ham4Ham". Ham4Ham was an event put on several times a week prior to the start of evening shows at The Richard Rodgers Theatre. Miranda, along with other cast members, would come out and perform some form of artistic entertainment for physical and virtual crowds who may not have access to the traditional musical (Wickman, 2015). Other virtual methods of connecting with the musical have included online quizzes, fan art, or fan videos (Herrera, 2018, p. 223). This

wealth of extraneous content created by fans and producers alike provides a clear example of the democratization process that artistic recreations can provide according to Benjamin's theory of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. While certain audiences of the musical may be alienated from consuming the original theatre production, through dissemination of certain content such as cast recordings they are able to create their own reproductions of the musical fit to their own contexts and needs. While these recreations are inherently separated from the aura of the live production, the democratization of art they provide allows for a communication of political and revolutionary ideology that may not have been accessible through the original play. Because audiences can form the musical to fit their own narratives, they are able to make a truly revolutionary musical experience compared to the far more traditional stage production on which their work is based.

Of course, *Hamilton* did eventually make its way to the silver screen. Through a partnership with streaming service Disney+, service subscribers would have access to a filmed recording of *Hamilton: An American Musical* as performed by the original cast starting July 3, 2020 (Spangler, 2020). The publication of *Hamilton* to Disney+ presents an interesting conundrum from the standpoint of Marxist critique. On the one hand, *Hamilton* has officially become affiliated with one of the world's largest entertainment corporations. With all the funding and exposure this partnership may provide, it also comes along with the necessity to work within a rather strict corporate agenda. As an example, because Disney+ is aimed at family audiences, little to no content on the service is rated higher than a PG-13 MPAA rating. To have *Hamilton* fit within these ratings guidelines, various curse words needed to be edited out (Polo, 2020). While this may seem like a minor adjustment, it is simply an example of the types of shifts large corporate entities are able to make in order to have content fit their agendas.

Furthermore, the transfer of *Hamilton* from the stage to the screen inevitably makes some profound changes to the way the text is absorbed and interpreted. First there is the issue of audience identification—a task which is much easier in theatre because audiences are viewing a live individual. However, when an audience is consuming a film, their identification tends to lie not with the performers on screen but with the camera capturing the action (Benjamin, 1969, p.10). This shift in identification ability also impacts the aura of *Hamilton*, though in a different way than fan recreations of the musical. While the collaborative nature of fan recreations provide access to the democratization power that reproduced media can provide, that level of integration simply is not present in the big-budget filmography of the *Hamilton* recording. Whereas much of the fan content is delivered through free or equitable means such as internet forums, Disney+ is a paid subscription service; even though the cost of a Disney+ subscription is far less than a ticket to see *Hamilton* live, it still provides a barrier to truly democratic reproduction. As a result, the loss of aura in the Disney+ recording of *Hamilton* tends to feel like more of an artistic loss than that within the fan reproductions.

### **Conclusion & Implications**

Over the course of this essay, I have examined *Hamilton: An American Musical* through the lens of Marxist literary and artistic critique. The purpose of this critical examination was to fill the perceived gap of class and power study within existing scholarship on the musical. This essay accomplished this critique through an extended review of existing scholarship on the musical; a three-fold application of Marxist theory to the musical's cultural context, narrative, and characters; and an examination of the musical's capitalist tendencies within the wider Broadway economy. With the completion of this essay, I believe I have provided a reasonable argument that *Hamilton*, while claiming to represent marginalized individuals in American

history, uses its storytelling decisions and position within the Broadway economic system to continue the perpetuation of elitist stories within history and broader entertainment media. It is my hope that this essay is not only beneficial to scholars looking to better understand the socioeconomic implications of a mega musical such as *Hamilton*, but that it also provides a heightened understanding of the role that Marxist theory and critique can play in studies of popular media.

In terms of the broader subject of critical media studies, this essay is designed to provide an example of how Marxist critiques of class and power within popular media can work to provide a deeper understanding of a work both as a plain text and as a representation of a specific economic and ideological context. Future research may continue to push the application of Marxist critique to *Hamilton*, such as to its representations of intersectionality through an examination of the women of the musical or a more in-depth analysis of the connection between popular music and capitalist power.



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