

**SOCIAL ISSUES AND ITS IMPACT PRESENTED IN
NOMADLAND (2022): A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE**

***¹Della Listiyani, ²Diana Anggraeni, ³Dian Fitri K.**

¹English Literature Department, Universitas Bangka Belitung

²English Literature Department, Universitas Bangka Belitung

³English Literature Department, Universitas Bangka Belitung

***Corresponding author, Email: monicadella123@gmail.com**

| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
|--|---|
| Received: 06-08-2024 Revised: 29-03-2025 Accepted: 29-08-2025 Published: 30-08-2025 Volume: 3 Issue: 1 DOI: https://doi.org/10.61276/loqula.v2i2.55 | This study examines the film <i>Nomadland</i> through the lens of Karl Marx’s Marxist theory, focusing on the dynamics of social class, economic exploitation, and class conflict represented in its narrative. The research seeks to uncover how social transformations affect both primary and secondary characters, while also assessing the relevance of Marxist theory in the context of contemporary society. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the analysis highlights the portrayal of social issues and their influence on the characters’ lives. The findings reveal two central issues from a Marxist perspective: social class injustice and labor exploitation, as reflected in the film’s narrative, dialogue, and characterization. Moreover, the study identifies two significant consequences: alienation—both self-alienation and labor alienation—and the lived experience of modern nomadic life. |
| KEYWORDS | |
| Alienation, Exploitation, Film, Marxism | |



Introduction

Literary studies investigate how texts—ranging from novels and poems to films—reflect and critique social realities. Beyond their entertainment value, such works often engage deeply with issues of inequality, exploitation, and class struggle, providing critical insights into societal structures (Widyaningrum & Hartarini, 2023). By applying theoretical frameworks such as Marxist criticism, literature and film can be understood as cultural sites where power relations and social tensions are negotiated.

Karl Marx's concepts of class struggle, exploitation, and alienation remain particularly relevant for examining cultural texts that portray the contradictions of capitalism. Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), adapted from Jessica Bruder's non-fiction book, offers a poignant case: through the character of Fern, the film portrays the precarious existence of modern nomads shaped by economic collapse and insecure labor conditions. While previous studies of *Nomadland* have emphasized its aesthetics, realism, and depiction of mobility, little attention has been paid to its Marxist dimensions, particularly its representation of class injustice and the alienation of labor. This gap underscores the need for a systematic Marxist reading of the film.

This study hypothesizes that *Nomadland* functions as a cinematic critique of capitalist structures by illustrating how exploitation and alienation define the lives of precarious workers under late capitalism. The analysis focuses on three aims: (1) examining how social class and labor exploitation are depicted; (2) exploring how alienation—both personal and labor-related—shapes the characters' experiences; and (3) assessing the film's contribution to Marxist discussions of social inequality and transformation. By situating *Nomadland* within Marxist literary criticism, the research contributes to the sociology of literature by showing how contemporary cinema both reflects and interrogates structural inequalities in modern society.



Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the film *Nomadland* through the lens of Marxist theory. Data were collected from the film's narrative, dialogue, and characterization, then classified and interpreted using concepts of class struggle, exploitation, and alienation. The qualitative design allows for an in-depth examination of the social issues and transformations depicted, providing a critical understanding of how the film reflects and critiques capitalist structures.

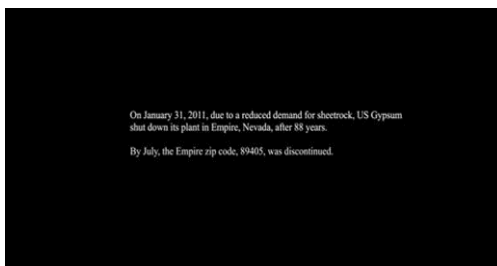
Discussion

A. Form of Social Issues

1. Social Class

Social Class presented through the narratives

Datum 1



In *Nomadland*, the closure of the US Gypsum plant in Empire, Nevada, marks a pivotal moment that underscores the profound impact of capitalist decisions on workers. The shutdown not only results in job losses for the proletariat but also highlights the social instability and economic disparity inherent in a capitalist system. According to Marxist theory, this decision exemplifies class conflict, where the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) profits at the expense of the working class (proletariat), leading to exploitation and alienation. Fern's transition to a nomadic lifestyle further illustrates the personal and economic sacrifices imposed by capitalism, as she packs her belongings into her van, symbolizing the erasure of individual identity in favor of broader economic forces and the alienation from the benefits of her labor.



This scene poignantly reflects how capitalist structures perpetuate social inequality and economic instability.

Datum 2



In the scene from *Nomadland*, the effective use of close-up camera angles and natural lighting vividly captures Fern's emotional state and the gravity of her transition to a nomadic lifestyle. Close-ups reveal her exhaustion and sadness as she packs, while medium shots contextualize her within the disarray of her belongings, illustrating her struggle between her past and an uncertain future. The warm, filtered sunlight enhances the scene's emotional depth, reflecting Fern's mixed feelings as she faces this significant life change. This visual portrayal aligns with Karl Marx's theory of class dynamics, where the bourgeoisie (capitalists) control production and profit from workers' labor, while the proletariat (workers) are left to navigate the instability and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system. The scene powerfully embodies the themes of transition, loneliness, and the exploitative nature of capitalist relationships.

Datum 3



In the scene from **Nomadland**, Fern's interactions with fellow nomads illustrate the impact of structural societal changes on diverse individuals. As Fern meets people from various social backgrounds in the nomad camps, the full shot of the group emphasizes their collective experience of exploitation by the capitalist system. The campfire lighting, signifying limited access to modern amenities, highlights the shared hardships of the working class. This communal setting reinforces Marx's idea of proletarian solidarity, where workers unite in their struggles against economic oppression. The scene effectively portrays how collective experiences and shared challenges foster social bonds and potential resistance against capitalist exploitation.

Social Class presented through dialogues

Datum 4

*Fern: Yeah, but **I wanted to get a job around here first.***

*Patty: Oh. Good luck with that. Mmm. **That's tough.***

In *Nomadland*, Fern's dialogue about seeking local employment highlights the critical role of wages for individuals in the proletariat class, reflecting their reliance on stable income for survival amidst economic instability. Her nomadic lifestyle underscores the broader uncertainties faced by the working class. In contrast, Patty's cynical response to Fern's job search reveals a lack of empathy and an implicit stereotype of the proletariat's struggles. Patty's attitude suggests a detachment from the hardships faced by lower-income individuals and points to the greater economic security often enjoyed by the bourgeoisie. This interaction reinforces Marx's depiction of social class dynamics, illustrating how economic inequality and privilege shape the experiences of different social classes.

Datum 5

*Linda May: Before I moved into the Squeeze Inn, **I was out looking for work** and putting in applications 2008, and **it was just tough.** And I got really, really **low point** (SIGHS DEEPLY)...So, I was getting close to 62 and I went online to look at my social security benefit it said \$550. **Fern, I had***



worked my whole life. *I'd work since I was 12 years old, raised two daughters. I couldn't believe it. So, I'm online and I find Bob Wells Cheap RV Living. I could live in an RV, travel, and not have to work for the rest of my life.*

In *Nomadland*, Linda May's experiences highlight the severe economic challenges faced by the working class under capitalism. Her struggle to secure employment and inadequate social security benefits reflect the exploitation and economic insecurity characteristic of the proletariat, as described by Marx. Linda's low pension, despite a lifetime of work, underscores the systemic inequality and insufficient support for the working class, who are often left vulnerable and dependent on minimal benefits. Her decision to embrace RV living, inspired by resources like Cheap RV Living, represents a response to economic uncertainty and a form of resistance against the capitalist system. This choice illustrates the broader struggle of the working class to find alternative ways to cope with economic disparities and highlights how class differences shape individual decisions and access to resources.

Datum 6

*Fern: My husband worked at the USG mine in Empire and I worked in human resources there for a few years. That was my last full-time job. **I did a lot of part-time jobs.** I cashiered at the Empire store. I was a substitute teacher at the school for five years.*

Woman: Didn't the Empire Mine shut down and then all of the resident workers had to relocate?

Fern: Yeah, about a year ago.

Woman: Wow. So, when do you need to get back to work? Fern: Now?

Woman: It is a tough time right now. You may want to consider registering for early retirement.

*Fern: I don't think I can get by on the benefits, and, um **I need work. I like work.** (HESITATES)*

Woman: I'm not sure exactly what you would be eligible for.



In *Nomadland*, Fern epitomizes the marginalized proletariat, showcasing the harsh realities faced by the working class. Despite her strength and self-reliance, Fern's transition to a nomadic lifestyle reflects the precarious nature of seasonal work and economic instability. Her employment history at the USG mine and her rejection of early retirement highlight her ongoing struggle for financial stability, a struggle that remains common among the working class. Marx's theory is evident in Fern's situation, where the closure of the mine and the limited retirement options expose the vulnerabilities and economic dependency inherent in proletariat life. The film illustrates the class struggle and the quest for economic agency amidst systemic exploitation and societal pressures, aligning with Marx's views on the struggles of the working class against capitalist constraints.

Datum 7

Merle: Um, I worked for corporate America you know, for 20 years. And my friend Bill, worked for the same company, and he had liver failure.

*A week before he was due to retire, **HR called him in hospice, and said "Let's talk about your retirement."** And he died 10 days later, **having never been able to take that sailboat that he bought out of his driveway. He missed out on everything and he told me before he died. "Just don't waste any time, Merle."** So, I retired as soon as I could. I didn't want my sailboat to be in the driveway when I died. (Clicks tongue) So yeah, and it's not. My sailboat's out here in the desert.*

In *Nomadland*, Merle's dialogue underscores the Marxist perspective on class conflict, illustrating the stark divide between the proletariat and the capitalists. Merle's and Bill's experiences highlight the constraints and injustices faced by workers within corporate structures. The dialogue reveals how corporate systems exploit workers, treating them as interchangeable assets rather than individuals with personal needs. For example, Bill's final days were marred by an impersonal HR call about retirement, reflecting the system's disregard for workers' well-being. This portrayal aligns with Marx's view that capitalists control and exploit the proletariat, benefiting from their labor while neglecting their personal and economic needs.



Datum 8



In the scene from **Nomadland** where Fern starts working at the Amazon warehouse, the use of artificial lighting and the medium full shot emphasize the monotonous and dehumanizing nature of her labor. The controlled environment and repetitive tasks reflect Marx's concept of labor alienation, where workers become estranged from both the production process and the end products of their work. Fern's role in this large, impersonal production system highlights her integration into the broader workforce, underscoring her lack of individual recognition and economic stability. The scene vividly captures the difficult conditions faced by seasonal workers like Fern, who navigate a precarious existence with minimal job security, illustrating the broader struggles of those marginalized by the capitalist economic system.

Datum 9



In *Nomadland*, Fern's job at the equipment store highlights the transient and impersonal nature of her work life, underscored by the artificial lighting that emphasizes the monotony and mechanization of her tasks. This setting reflects Marx's concept of labor alienation, where workers like Fern feel disconnected from both the production process and the products of their



labor. The medium full shot situates Fern within the broader economic system, illustrating her role as a cog in the larger capitalist machinery, where workers are often seen as interchangeable parts contributing to the profits of capital owners. Her constant need to shift between temporary jobs underscores the instability and exploitation faced by the proletariat, revealing how the capitalist system perpetuates social class inequality and economic vulnerability.

Datum 10



Fern's varied temporary jobs in Nomadland, such as working at an Amazon warehouse, an equipment store, and a restaurant, underscore the precarious nature of employment in capitalist societies. Her roles in these service and manual jobs exemplify Marx's concept of the working class, where workers are often alienated from their labor and the products they produce. The uniform artificial lighting and the medium full shots used in these scenes emphasize the monotonous and impersonal work environment, reflecting the mechanical nature of Fern's employment and her status as a cog in the larger economic machine. Her constant need to seek temporary jobs highlights the instability and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system, where workers face economic uncertainty and lack job security or benefits. This depiction aligns with Marxist theory, which criticizes how capitalism perpetuates class disparities by exploiting workers and maintaining economic inequality.



2. Exploitation

Exploitation presented through the narratives

Datum 2



In this scene from *Nomadland*, Fern's struggle with financial instability and reliance on unstable, temporary jobs underscores the Marxist critique of capitalism. Marx's theory highlights how capitalism allows the bourgeoisie to exploit the proletariat by extracting surplus value from their labor, paying them less than the value they create. Fern's situation reflects this power imbalance and vulnerability, illustrating how the capitalist system generates economic uncertainty and dependence for the working class.

Datum 11



This scene illustrates how Fern's nomadic life and limited food supplies highlight the economic hardships and alienation faced by the working class under capitalism. The close-up camera angle emphasizes Fern's isolation and the stark contrast between her current poverty and a higher standard of living she might have once known. According to Marxist theory, this scene reflects how workers, exploited by capitalists, often experience severe material and psychological deprivation. The use of minimal resources and artificial lighting



underscores the broader social injustice and economic inequality in capitalist society, where the proletariat is marginalized and constrained by their limited access to basic necessities, in stark contrast to the more privileged bourgeoisie.

Datum 12



The scene where Swankie falls ill and is treated by Fern with limited resources poignantly highlights the exploitation and inequalities in capitalist society. The natural lighting underscores the warmth and solidarity between Fern and Swankie, contrasting with the harshness of their living conditions. From a Marxist perspective, this scene reflects the broader issue of inadequate healthcare and social support for the working class, who are often left to fend for themselves in a system prioritizing profit over welfare. The medium full shot emphasizes their connection and the community support that becomes crucial amidst economic exploitation. This portrayal aligns with Marx's critique of capitalism, showing how economic structures sacrifice individual well-being for capital gains, leaving the proletariat to rely on mutual support in the face of systemic neglect.

Datum 13



In Datum 13, the scene at the Amazon distribution center highlights the exploitation of workers within a capitalist system. The use of artificial lighting



and the medium close-up shots emphasize the monotonous and impersonal nature of the work, underscoring the alienation Marx describes, where workers are detached from the products of their labor and the production process. The portrayal of Linda May, an elderly worker, reflects the harsh reality of capitalist exploitation, where even older workers are compelled to endure demanding jobs for insufficient compensation. This scene vividly illustrates how capitalism exploits workers' labor while neglecting their well-being, aligning with Marx's critique of economic inequality and exploitation.

Datum 14



Datum 14 depicts Fern working at a contractor's site at night, illustrating the exploitation and alienation inherent in capitalist labor practices. The extreme long shot emphasizes Fern's isolation within the vast work environment, reinforcing the Marxist concept of workers feeling like insignificant parts of a larger machine. The harsh artificial lighting underscores the impersonal and monotonous nature of the work, highlighting the alienation workers experience from both their labor and its products. Additionally, Fern's role as a female laborer in a physically demanding, male-dominated field highlights gender-based exploitation and systemic inequalities within capitalism, where workers are often subjected to harsh conditions and minimal compensation. This scene encapsulates the broader issues of economic and gender exploitation, reflecting the need for systemic changes to address these disparities.



Exploitation presented through dialogues

Datum 6

*Linda May: Before I moved into the Squeeze Inn, **I was out looking for work and putting in applications 2008, and it was just tough.** And I got really, really low point (SIGHS DEEPLY)... So, I was getting close to 62 and I went online to look at my social security benefit it said \$550. **Fern, I had worked my whole life.** I'd work since I was 12 years old, raised two daughters. I couldn't believe it. So, I'm online and I find Bob Wells Cheap RV Living. I could live in an RV, travel, and not have to work for the rest of my life.*

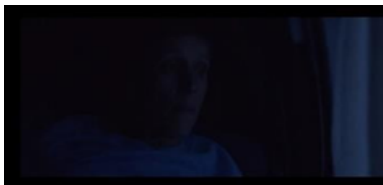
Datum 14 illustrates the exploitation of the working class through Linda May's experience with inadequate pension benefits. According to Marx, the value of labor should reflect the amount of time and effort invested in it. Linda May's low pension highlights a disparity between the value of her lifelong labor and the compensation she receives, underscoring the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system. This exploitation drives Linda May to consider alternative lifestyles, such as living in an RV, as a response to the financial insecurity she faces despite her years of hard work. This situation reflects the broader issue of how capitalism fails to adequately reward workers for their labor, leading to economic instability and unjust outcomes for the working class.

B. The Impact of Social Class and Exploitation

1. Alienation

Self-Alienation

Datum 15



Datum 15 captures Fern's profound sense of alienation and solitude as she navigates her new life as a nomad. The close-up shots and natural lighting emphasize her emotional detachment and introspection, highlighting a stark contrast between her intimate, solitary moments and the impersonal work environments she encounters. According to Marx, this alienation stems from estrangement from oneself and one's surroundings, a condition exacerbated by the upheaval of Fern's life from a stable, familiar existence to an uncertain, nomadic lifestyle. The quiet and solitude underscore her sense of isolation, illustrating how these changes contribute to a loss of identity and a deepened sense of disconnection from her former life and the world around her.

Labour-Alienation

Datum 4

*Fern: Yeah, but **I wanted to get a job around here first.***

*Patty: Oh. Good luck with that. Mmm. **That's tough.***

In Datum 4, Fern's difficulty in finding a job and Patty's pessimistic response exemplify Marx's concept of alienation. Fern's struggle signifies a separation from the product of her labor, as she lacks control over securing employment and thus the outcome of her work. Additionally, her challenges reflect alienation from the work process itself, where she has limited control over the conditions and nature of the work available. Moreover, Patty's response underscores social alienation, illustrating how competitive capitalist environments foster individualism and a lack of solidarity, deepening Fern's sense of isolation. Thus, the dialogue illustrates various forms of estrangement experienced by workers in a capitalist system, aligning with Marx's perspective on alienation.



Modern Nomadic Lifestyle

Datum 16



The analysis of the modern nomadic lifestyle in "Nomadland" highlights a significant shift from historical nomadism to contemporary responses to socio-economic challenges. Unlike traditional nomads who moved in search of natural resources, modern nomads, like Fern, are driven by economic instability, job loss, and a rejection of conventional societal norms. This lifestyle serves as both a practical adaptation to economic uncertainty and a form of protest against the capitalist system's exploitation and structural injustice. The film depicts this modern nomadism as a collective response to alienation and social inequity, contrasting with the impersonal nature of capitalist work environments and emphasizing the role of community and solidarity among nomads.

Conclusion

Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* effectively illustrates social issues through a Marxist lens, particularly social class disparity, labor exploitation, and alienation. The analysis shows how self-alienation, labor alienation, and the adoption of a nomadic lifestyle emerge as responses to systemic inequalities within capitalism. Through Fern's journey, the film demonstrates that modern nomadism is less a voluntary lifestyle choice than a manifestation of class struggle and alienation, reflecting broader critiques of capitalist society.



References

- Abdillah, A., Oka Prastio, L., & Nur Effendi, S. (2021). Analisis Alienasi Sosial Karl Marx dalam Kebijakan Sistem Pemagangan Nasional Indonesia. *Jurnal Identitas*, 1(2), 48–61. <https://doi.org/10.52496/identitas.v1i2.155>
- Amalia, S., Bahasa, S., Arab, S., Basid Bahasa, A., & Darusti Bahasa, F. (2018). The Concept of Marxism In The Movie “The Young of Karl Marx” Based on The Perspective of Genetic Structuralism. *International Seminar On Recent Language, Literature, And Local Culture Studies (BASA)*, 280(Basa), 457–463. <https://www.atlantispress.com/proceedings/basa-18/25906121>
- Anggito, A., & Setiawan, J. (2018). Metodologi penelitian kualitatif. CV Jejak.
- bambang, rizky. (n.d.). Sosiologi Sastra. rizkybambang.
- Cain, M., & Hunt, A. (1979). Marx and Engels on Law. Academic Press.
- Cendekia, M. S. (2019). FILM DAN DAKWAH: MEMAHAMI REPRESENTASI PESAN-PESAN DAKWAH DALAM FILM MELALUI ANALISIS SEMIOTIK. MEDIA SAHABAT CENDEKIA. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=UbKeDwAAQBAJ>
- Churchich, N. (1990). Marxism and Alienation. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=vcXbuAVZTXAC>
- Comninel, G. C. (2018). Alienation and Emancipation in the Work of Karl Marx. Palgrave Macmillan US. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=IVdxDwAAQBAJ>
- Cormack, M. (1993). Ideology And Cinematography In Hollywood: 1930-1939. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=ZSuwCwAAQBAJ>
- de Leeuw, B. (1997). Digital Cinematography: Lighting and Photographing Computer Generated Animation. Elsevier Science. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=8ff7MkdTadYC>



-
- Eagleton, T. (2002). *Literary theory: An introduction*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2011). *How to read a poem*. Yale University Press.
- Fisher, E. (2012). How less alienation creates more exploitation? audience labour on social network sites. *TripleC*, 10(2), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.31269/vol10iss2pp171-183>
- Giddens, A. (1973). *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge University Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=Krv3CwAAQBAJ>
- Harrison, R. L., Reilly, T. M., & Creswell, J. W. (2020). Methodological Rigor in Mixed Methods: An Application in Management Studies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 14(4), 473–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689819900585>
- Ibrahim, S. Q. F., & Mahmood, R. J. (2016). *Critical perspectives on Marx's approach to Social Classes in Society*. GRIN Verlag. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=qpWRDAAAQBAJ>
- Kassem, S. (2024). *Work and Alienation in the Platform Economy: Amazon and the Power of Organization*. Bristol University Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=vhvoEAAAQBAJ>
- Lancaster, K. (2019). *Basic Cinematography: A Creative Guide to Visual Storytelling*. Taylor & Francis. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=pcbADwAAQBAJ>
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1845). *The German ideology*. Marxists Internet Archive.
- Marx, P. K. (2019). *Pemikiran-Pemikiran Karl Marx*. October. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/5q2ts>
- Mulghani, M. A. (2023). *Exploitation : A Marxist Analysis of The Great Gatsby* by. *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 4(3), 114–119.



-
- Øversveen, E., & Kelly, C. A. (2023). Labour, capital and the struggle over history: Reconstructing Marxist class theory from the standpoint of alienation. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 26(3), 317–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310221129981>
- Raharusun, J. H., Filsafat, S. T., & Pineleng, S. (2021). MEDIA Jurnal Filsafat dan Teologi Makna Kerja Menurut Karl Marx (Sebuah Kajian dari Perspektif Filsafat Manusia). *Media: Jurnal Teologi Dan Filsafat*, 2(1), 121–144.
- Scott, S. (2017). *Labour Exploitation and Work-Based Harm*. Policy Press. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=_BcwDwAAQBAJ
- Selwyn, B. (2013). Karl Marx, Class Struggle and Labour-Centred Development. 48–70.
- Silver, M. L. (2015). *Under Construction: Work and Alienation in the Building Trades*. State University of New York Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=-Q2UsnXlNd0C>
- Trianingtyas, A., & Anam, Z. (2023). The working-class struggle against capitalist oppression in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. 12(1), 88–97.
- Wesolowski, W. (2014). *Classes, Strata and Power (RLE Social Theory)*. Taylor & Francis. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=8QBUBAAAQBAJ>
- Widyaningrum, A., & Hartarini, Y. M. (2023). *Pengantar Ilmu Sastra*.
- Yuwandi, I. (2018). Analisis Sinematografi Dalam Film *Polem Ibrahim Dan Dilarang Mati Di Tanah Ini*. Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Skripsi, 1–93. [https://repository.ar-raniry.ac.id/eprint/5237/2/Izar Yuwandi.pdf](https://repository.ar-raniry.ac.id/eprint/5237/2/Izar%20Yuwandi.pdf)

