

Commentary Paper

The film “Nomadland” challenges the initial idea that Wengrow and Graeber propose in *Dawn of Everything* that humans are now “stuck” in a social formation of inequality. The current social formation is well-established at the start of the film, when the protagonist Fern is unable to receive unemployment benefits, work, or other financial assistance via governing institutions. She is, as those living within the capitalist structure define it, “homeless”: sleeping in her van without a primary residence in the form “traditional” building to her name serves as a primary residence, with a “traditional” building to inhabit. Fern’s journey in embracing the nomad lifestyle captures her (and others’) exploration of alternative social formations and getting “unstuck”. The nomads, guided by Bob Well, seek to escape the “yoke” of work and the “tyranny of the dollar.” This rhetoric not only highlights how the nomad counterculture is perceived as freeing from the restrictive and repressive capitalist social formation, but it is also reminiscent of Durkheim’s societal “yoke” and the Davids’ postulations on early explorations of “egalitarian” communities. Although the nomads participate in wage labor to obtain currency, they do so only as a means of interacting with the world outside. The value placed on wealth in capitalist culture greatly contrasts the set of values seen in nomad life: freedom, communal “kindness”, and experiences. The difference between Fern getting rejected for financial assistance and Fern being integrated into nomadic society is striking. Among the nomads, Swankie mentors Fern to prepare her for van life, Dave helps Fern find a job and gives her his can opener, and strangers provide food to one another. The audience is left to ask the same questions that Kandiaronk once posed: what kind of “civilized” humans are we if we accumulate wealth and leave others wanting?

Although “Nomadland” presents a counterexample to capitalist social formations, neither lifestyle should be considered “positive” or “negative”; instead, the “positive” is our ability to consider and choose among alternative types of social formations. Fern did not leave her previous lifestyle to become a nomad; she was forced to alternative means due to restrictive structures. However, when given the option to reintegrate into culture, she chooses her nomadic life. This active choice highlights her ability to weigh alternatives and exert agency. The same principles can be applied to those who experience nomadic lifestyle (or observe its everyday intricacies and complexities) but choose to remain in capitalist culture. While the nomads ultimately choose freedom and communism at the cost of security, those who do not become nomads after watching the film arguably make the opposite tradeoff. We forsake some of our freedom and independence for security and consistency. Depicting alternatives we may not have considered, “Nomadland” reminds us of the tradeoffs we make as individuals and as a society, either consciously or by default.

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