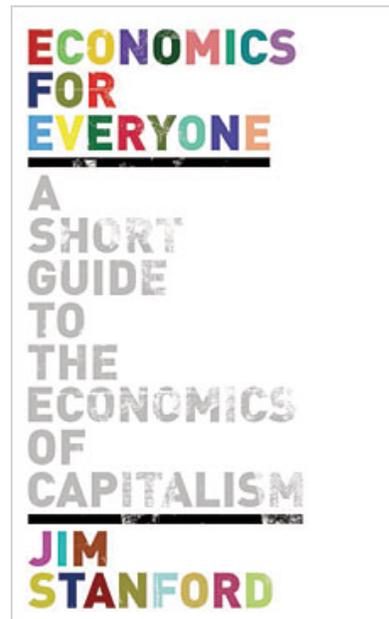


# ECONOMICS FOR EVERYONE: MY FAVOURITE ECONOMICS MOVIES!

*By Jim Stanford*

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## Audio Visual Supplements for Economics Literacy Courses

To liven things up a bit for any unions or other groups undertaking a popular economics training course, I list below a few of my favourite movies that have a connection (tenuous in some cases, I admit!) to economics. I know this sounds like a stretch, but economics can actually make for some great film-making: drama, inspiration, humour.

I have listed the movies in order of their logical connection to the sample 13-session *Economics for Everyone* course outline that is posted on the *e4e* website:

[http://www.economicsforeveryone.ca/files/uploads/course\\_outline\\_0.pdf](http://www.economicsforeveryone.ca/files/uploads/course_outline_0.pdf)

But really, you can show these films anytime, anywhere.

I welcome suggestions of other films (or any other AV teaching supplements, for that matter), and will post your suggestions on the *e4e* website. Send them along to [author@economicsforeveryone.com](mailto:author@economicsforeveryone.com).

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### **Session 1: The Economy and Economics**

*Supersize Me* (2004, Dir. Morgan Spurlock). Wonderful example of the distinction (and often the conflict) between doing something that's good for profit (which, after all, is the motivation for 85% or more of production in capitalism), and doing something that's good for human beings.

## **Session 2: A Little History**

*A Christmas Carol* (1951, Dir. Brian Desmond Hurst). Charles Dickens described the gruesome reality of early capitalism better than anyone, and this is the classic portrayal of the greediest capitalist of all. Scrooge's speech wondering why he should take care of poor people (that's what poorhouses and work camps are for) was a startling premonition of neoliberal social policy! The Muppets version of the movie (1992) is also good! *Oliver* (1968, Dir. Carol Reed) is another twist on the same broad theme.

*The World Turned Upside Down* (1998, Dir. Roy Hanney). A short (23 minutes) film about the violent enclosure of common lands in the early days of English capitalism.

## **Session 3: Work and Tools**

*Modern Times* (1936, Dir. Charlie Chaplin). Last (and most powerful) appearance of Chaplin's "Little Tramp" character. Shows the consequences when rationalization of labour in the interests of profit maximization is taken to its logical extreme!

## **Session 4: Class: Bosses, Owners, and Workers**

Of course, there are many great films about workers and their struggle for a better life. My favourites are:

*Germinal* (1993, Dir. Claude Berri). Long, and with French sub-titles. But Gerard Depardieu is so cuddly (even in a tragic role). In the end the miners lose this fight – but the viewer knows full well that the battle isn't over.

*Harlan County USA* (1976, Dir. Barbara Kopple). As realistic and brutal a portrayal of the challenge of fighting back, in an epic Kentucky coal strike. Reveals the highly non-neutral role played by government and its agencies. Kopple also directed the equally powerful *American Dream* (1992) about another epic but losing strike (at Hormel). Both films won Academy Awards. But I am getting tired of noble defeats; I want a victory or two. I guess there's always *Norma Rae* (1979, Dir. Martin Ritt). They won union certification, thanks to Sally Field – though by now the plant has probably moved to China.

*Margaret's Museum* (1995, Dir. Mort Ransen). Why are so many of these films about coal mines? Very well done, with a Canadian connection.

OK, this one won't win any Academy Awards (certainly not for the acting), but here's a highly-tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the high-and-mighty economic role of the CEO: the most powerful creature in the business jungle. *The CEO Hunter* (2005, Dir. Michael Connolly) is 5 minutes of silliness, available (with apologies to the late Steve Irwin!) on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyAcIWGip0E>.

## **Session 5: Reproduction and Gender; Closing the Circle**

*Who's Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies, and Global Economics* (1995, Dir. Terre Nash). Accessible and infuriating summary of Waring's arguments regarding the gender and accounting biases of conventional economics.

## **Session 6: Competition, Investment, and Growth**

*The Corporation* (2003, Dir. Mark Akbar and Jennifer Abbott). Based on the book of the same name by Joel Bakan. Shows the ruthless, almost psychopathic behaviour that is the logical extension of the corporation's fundamental *raison d'être*: making money, swads of it, shifting costs to others, and paying as little tax as possible! Sustains the argument that if individual human beings behaved this way, they would be institutionalized (if not imprisoned) for anti-social behaviour. This is a clever, powerful analogy. But I do not agree with the film's implicit conclusion that if we revoked corporate charters (the legal statute that shields corporate owners from unlimited liability for their companies' actions), then capitalism would work better. I think it is the pursuit of profit, not the corporate form *per se*, that is at fault.

Wal-Mart's phenomenal, irresponsible growth has sparked several critical films, including *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005, Dir. Robert Greenwald) and *Wal-Mart Nation* (2008, Dir. Andrew Munger). The latter has a Canadian connection ... including a short interview with yours truly!

## **Session 7: Employment and Distribution**

*Roger and Me* (1989, Dir. Michael Moore). Moore's big breakthrough with in-your-face film-making. Chronicles his efforts to track down Roger Smith, then-CEO of General Motors, to discuss the devastating impacts of GM's downsizing on the town of Flint, Michigan. Examines the fundamental dependence of working people on business investment decisions that is a hallmark of capitalism (and a central theme of *Economics for Everyone*). Effectively ridicules the trite, up-by-the-bootstraps responses of those who claim that workers just have to get more ambitious and entrepreneurial in response to the failure of business investment.

## **Session 8: Capitalism and the Environment**

Well, I guess I have to mention here *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, Dir. Davis Guggenheim), narrated by Al Gore, and winner of the Academy Award. Great production values, powerful impact, but ultimately a rather incrementalist and unconvincing policy conclusion. The PBS film version of journalist Martin Smith's *Heat* (2008, viewable on-line at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/heat/view/>) is a bit more honest about the role of profits and big business in creating this potential catastrophe.

*Downstream* (2008, Dir. Leslie Iwerks) is a very powerful short (33 minutes) documentary regarding the effects of tar sands developments in northern Alberta on the lives of the aboriginal people who live downstream from these horrendous developments. It's a great critique of environmental inequality (that is, the fact that poor people suffer far more from pollution than rich people), and of the fantastic profits extracted from the tar sands – profits which do not reflect the total social and environmental costs of the developments.

*The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, Dir. Roland Emmerich) gives us the blockbuster Hollywood treatment of the subject. For my tastes, however, *Silkwood* (1983, Dir. Mike Nichols) is a most powerful story about the confluence of environment and class in the fight for a sustainable world.

### **Session 9: The Paper Economy and the Real Economy: Money, Banking, and Finance**

*Mary Poppins* (1964, Dir. Robert Stevenson). When little Michael is forced by his father to take his tuppence to the bank, the elder statesman of the firm (played incognito by Dick van Dyke) gives as good a statement of the supposedly productive role of private finance as you'll ever hear (explaining how Michael's tuppence will be magically transformed into canals, plantations, and other productive ventures). But then, with a few shouted words from Michael, the whole edifice comes tumbling down – a eerie premonition of the great crash of 2008!

*Turbulences* (1998, Dir. Carole Poliquin). One-hour documentary organized around a “day in the life” of global financial markets. Shows the irrationality, the instability, and the awful human consequences of the global paper chase.

### **Session 10: Government and the Economy**

*A Very British Coup* (1988, Dir. Mick Jackson). Made-for-TV adaptation of the Chris Mullin novel, showing that our system is not nearly as “democratic” as it pretends to be, if and when the powers-that-be decide their interests are not being well-served. Sure, it sounds like a grand conspiracy. But like I always say: just because you're paranoid, that doesn't prove you're *not* being followed!

### **Session 11: Globalization and Development**

*Life and Debt* (2001, Dir. Stephanie Black). Awesome, beautiful, infuriating documentary about real life in Jamaica under structural adjustment and the Washington Consensus. Equally awesome reggae soundtrack.

*The Yes Men* (2003, Dir. Dan Ollman, Sarah Price, and Chris Smith). Classic in-your-face documentary hi-jinx. Follows two shit-disturbers who impersonate WTO officials at official speaking engagements, parodying the dictates of global free trade. Has spawned a whole cottage industry of on-film fakers.

## **Session 12: Stability and Instability in Capitalism**

There are lots of great movies about the Great Depression (the 1930s version, that is). John Steinbeck's novels summed up both the hardship and the resilience of those years better than anyone: *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940, Dir. John Ford) and *Of Mice and Men* (first version 1939, Dir. Lewis Milestone; modern version 1992, Dir. Gary Sinise – both very powerful). *Annie* (1982, Dir. John Huston) gives a lighter, musical take, complete with Roosevelt and a bomb-throwing Bolshevik.

What will be the best movies of the current, next Great Depression???

## **Session 13: Challenging Capitalism**

The seizure of abandoned factories by workers in Argentina, who committed to continue production, was both inspiring and dramatic – and sparked much film-making. My favourite is *The Take* (2004, Dir. Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein). A companion book (*Sin Patron*, now available in English) tells the stories of the occupations.

I love two big-screen romances of the Russian Revolution that portray the bittersweet sweep, hope, and ruthlessness of what the Bolsheviks were trying to do, through differing lenses of individuals involved and affected: *Reds* (1981, Dir. Warren Beatty) was more sympathetic to the revolutionaries' original motivations, while *Doctor Zhivago* (1965, Dir. David Lean) was more agnostic. Wear a warm sweater while watching either one.