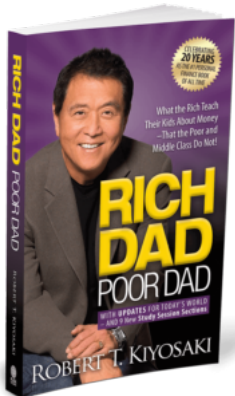
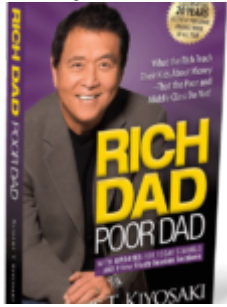


The Cost of “Financial Literacy”

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In 1997, Robert Kiyosaki published *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*—a cultural phenomena that has inspired swaths of Americans to try their hand at real estate investing and small-cap stock trading, or at least promise themselves to do so once they have more spare change. The royal purple and gold design of the front cover is reminiscent of Willy Wonka, and undoubtedly belongs in a rotating self-help section near the pharmaceutical corner of a franchised grocery store. In this book, he stresses the importance of financial education, or “financial literacy.”

Personal finance focuses on developing discipline to put aside money, eliminating (or at least cherry picking) your debtors, and generating more income than you spend. Knowledge of it helps people. But Kiyosaki’s focus is not credit score repair or personal budgeting, and he has no problem racking up debt for the cause of infinite financial expansion.

Per the title, the book compares his friend’s father (Rich Dad) with his own father (Poor Dad). Kiyosaki portrays his dad as a socialist loser, a teacher who could never seem to get ahead because he didn’t start a business or purchase assets. He succumbed to expense-generating “liabilities” and blamed the government for society’s problems, a big no-no in the Kiyosaki doctrine (which rings hollow in the 2020s). Rich Dad, on the other hand, is a financial messiah to Kiyosaki and his friend, a monopolizing mystic who preaches an all too familiar anti-beatitude: own apartments, own businesses, and own the misery of others to be free from your own.

The book suggests that the key to ascending from the working class is to join the owning class through investing, where you can forever feed from the golden trough of passive-income, typically replenished by the working class you were once a part of.

Layman “investing,” as the term is most commonly used in the United States, is a somewhat roundabout way to get you where you should’ve been when you received your paycheck and benefits. Instead of being paid a healthy wage and pension, you move leftover digits from your thin income into the profits of large companies in prayer of a good (or even early) retirement.

Under a pro-labor agenda, these exorbitant profits are tapered to tilt revenue toward workers,

increase local circulations of money, and wane the dystopian scramble to get a piece of America's profit-pie. But for Kiyosaki, questioning the morality of privatized greed is for scared losers like his dad. The way he characterizes his biological father insinuates that ignoring the opportunities of capitalism is a moral failing in its own right.

Though initially destined for hotel seminars, realty documentaries, and poop-reading, Kiyosaki has slithered onto the social media scene donning millennial-friendly glasses. People in the COVID-economy are desperate to escape their conditions, and Kiyosaki, like so many other business gurus, seems like he might just hold the key. A YouTube search of his name will provide a slew of interviews cut-up with stock footage and dramatic music, meant to inspire miserable young men lost in an artificially intelligent wormhole of self-help-entrepreneurship. But his sermon shouldn't be bought. In a 2017 Facebook post, he shared an image that reads, "It's the poor who are greedy, not the rich."

Kiyosaki represents a popular American ideology that hides in most of our minds, politics, and top-rated business podcasts: the rich are cool, have earned the right to influence public policy, and we should try to be like them. Whether it's owning businesses, real estate, or stocks, the only cost perceived is individual hustle—a fatal flaw that leads Americans to prioritize networking over friendship, and view workers and renters as something to be squeezed. Indeed, it's easier to become the exploiter than organize the exploited.

Publicly traded McDonalds, Walmart, and Amazon are extremely profitable because workers are had for the lowest "acceptable" price. This suggests little regard for the livelihood of "unskilled" workers, linguistically validated by the fact that they are called "unskilled." Employees are losers and owners are winners in our cultural caste system. In the country of personal responsibility, many Americans are prone to admit these workers are underpaid, but that it's on them to grow skills in the knowledge economy and find a better-paying job. This line of thinking fails to recognize that millions of people still need to fill jobs at McDonalds, Walmart, and Amazon in order for consumers of all classes to continually enjoy the delicacies of dry egg McMuffins and stringy Amazon tape that may or may not be recyclable. What would happen if all employees of all blue-chip companies quit their jobs, instead opting to flip and sling random bullshit on e-commerce platforms?

Allies of Kiyosaki might say "most people are just meant to be employees, some are meant to lead them." As a film director, I understand there are settings where it helps to have a captain. But how much longer should we submit to this pointlessly circular system of trying to own and out-compete each other? Instead of escaping labor (through exploiting others for the lowest possible wage and the highest possible rent), we should ask how we can make labor and property humane, once and for all. What's the point of bringing civilization, gadgets, and health technology this far for half of us to struggle for the basics?

If one aligns with Jordan Peterson's depressing ideology that men succeed more in business (in part) because they are "less agreeable" than women, one may also accept a neo-Darwinian view of human biology that some of us are simply meant for unwavering submission to bosses (or masculine men), no matter the circumstance or minimum wage. Even if some form of submission is true of human nature—still—there is no empathic intelligence or broader societal foresight present in the incomprehensibly large disparity between CEO and worker pay that funds the stocks that America loves.

Investors are buying up stocks—and thus driving up share prices—at increasing levels that guess revenue results further and further into the future, and CFOs feel the heat to trim payroll costs and benefits as much as possible in the name of shareholder responsibility. Owner-centric budgeting is always advantageous to the leaders crafting the budgets, at the expense of employee livelihood. The

failure to grow wages in equivalent rates to productivity, inflation, and cost of living can be attributed to the shape of our shareholder economy worshipped by Kiyosaki. The half of Americans who are invested in the markets are crossing their fingers for infinite growth, and it's not only squashing non-invested workers, but in some instances, the quality of materials used in the products we purchase.

Kiyosaki also stresses the importance of owning income-producing land. What better way to prove your property-know-how than joining forces with New York's most famous proprietor of commercial real estate? In the YouTube pit of Kiyosaki, there are archived occasions of our hero lauding Donald Trump pre-presidency, an alleged billionaire he idolizes but has never managed to match in net worth. In 2006, they collaborated on a new installment in Kiyosaki's endless literary saga, *Why We Want You To Be Rich*. The online description to the book is eerie (especially if actually written before the Great Recession), and it ostracizes the working class as simply uninformed in a way that wealthy business gurus often do. The description on Amazon reads:

Donald Trump and Robert Kiyosaki are both concerned. Their concern is that the rich are getting richer but America is getting poorer. Like the polar ice caps, the middle class is disappearing. America is becoming a two-class society.

Soon you will be either rich or poor. Donald and Robert want you to be rich.

The world is facing many challenges and one of them is financial. The entitlement mentality is epidemic, creating people who expect their countries, employers, or families to take care of them. Trump and Kiyosaki, both successful businessmen, are natural teachers who share a passion for education. They have joined forces to address these challenges, because they believe you cannot solve money problems with money. You can only solve money problems with financial education. Trump and Kiyosaki want to teach you to be rich. "Why We Want You To Be Rich" was written for you.

It's absurd to suggest that people attain virtue through independence from companies and families; we are tribal beings, families are positive constructs, and I assume they are called "companies" for a reason. To contrast Jordan Peterson's reality (where we let a select few utterly dominate because that's just how it is), we can cater to the communal parts of our primality by facilitating equitable work spaces where people form packs and stick together. What do we have instead? Most young people I know leave their jobs every year or two, thinking the next thing might be different, starved of a sane place to be and do.

Instead of asking how the wealthiest country in the history of humanity can eliminate poverty, a question which fueled many Martin Luther King Jr. speeches, Kiyosaki and Trump want to sell you the idea that time is running out to join their gentrifying oligarchy—just take their breakthrough advice to own corporations and condos. They admit the deterioration of the middle class, but are incapable of considering how their economic practices and public personas have exacerbated such economic polarization since the 1980s.

Kiyosaki's biography is poetry for paralleling Trump's financial failures—destruction often follows aggressive capitalists who never say enough is enough. In 2012, "Rich Dad Global LLC" went bankrupt, and has faced lawsuits for hosting apparently lackluster seminars. If Kiyosaki is a crook, where does that leave working Americans who still subconsciously subscribe to his ideology?

With an uncritical first glance, the words of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* glow with a hope and promise of bootstrapping your way to income-producing ownership through decreasing personal liabilities, but

his words offer little substance for working folks wanting to get a handle on their present liberation and future retirement. Financial advisors often tout that you shouldn't rely on social security, just to be safe. The looming existential threat to social security illuminates the instability and unsustainable nature of our failing state that, in true Kiyosaki fashion, has gone \$27 trillion dollars in debt to seasonally bailout corporations and upkeep (military) property across the globe. Kiyosaki's premise of individual liberation offers alienated workers an energizing but poisonous antidote to collective U.S. decline and neoliberal withering of the safety net.

Progressives demand profits for owners and shareholders be less, so that working folks receive high enough wages to support children, healthcare, education, and retirement that American society so insists we individually upkeep through the mood swings of the private sector. Unfortunately, bona fide economic justice is asking too much for the majority of Congress and President Biden. We are stuck with mutual funds and malnourished IRAs because it's the only way for a working person to "guarantee" a small and risky retirement in the increasing blight of the crumbling American ghetto. The state hates the cost of its people, and so do most employers.

If this sounds scary, take Kiyosaki's advice. Become an inside-trader and buy the next hot small-cap stock, but be sure to sell at the correct minute. Diversify by becoming a residential landlord, which typically requires a 20-30% down payment—a harder sum to save for than the government-sponsored FHA 3.5% down-payment. The FHA loan is only available for purchasing personal property for non-rental usage, but personal finance enthusiasts like using FHA loans to "house hack." Don't have money for either loan-type? Other real estate gurus insist that anyone can obtain "creative financing" for rental property down payments. (translation: "debt")

Whether Americans are working full-time, starting their own businesses, or parsing together gig work to make ends meet, the promise of a pension is dead, and the word "labor" itself has been exiled from the mainstream vernacular, perhaps intentionally by the owning class whose fifty-year side hustle has been to puppeteer the political and media landscape against working class interests.

Why does investing seem to be the only tried-and-true way to escape the rat race? Why do we want to get out so bad? It's because raw labor is becoming more and more distant from the value produced. It's because blue-chip bosses have Kiyosaki on their bookshelf and deep down, think their employees are losers for not being owners. It's because capitalism is reverting to the era of Dickens and Dostoyevsky, where workers in respite bang their head against the apartment wall, hoping they don't wake the landlord with their "thump, thump, thump." American labor rights are asleep in Serbia—if left to slumber, she risks her sanity, health, collective wealth, and shared ecology. The scale is weighted for the investor infinitely more than the worker, so much so that everything will fall off the desk.

No one thinks it's wrong to manage personal finances well. Personal responsibility of the able-bodied is required for survival in any economic system. Americans buy dumb shit, but most of these transactions are an act of defiance against true freedom never had. We do not reject work. We reject the unfathomable magnitude of our present inequality, systematically transferred upward for the last half-century to the tune of fifty-trillion dollars. We reject the incessant praising of these thieves in the media. We reject giving the planet's keys to tax-avoiding tech-overlords. By relying solely on mutual funds, we've bestowed complete reliance to corporate-leaders in the name of liberty, and they will crush our tongues mid-boot-lick.

We should not let the market and our retirement accounts prevent us from demanding a more equitable present tense. 80% of U.S. stocks are owned by the wealthiest 10%. Half of stocks are owned by the top 1%. When the market turns the worker's \$30,000 into \$33,000, they turn their \$300 million into \$330 million. Hedge funds are early to reallocate in a downturn, immediately

decreasing the account balance of the working class. Who wins in this economic system?

The “risk” of investing, whether from Wall Street or Reddit, is hardly a virtue to be praised; it is socially acceptable gambling that not only functions through surplus value and human suffering, but, in its current distribution, will create conditions that crash the Western economy again and again until the U.S. dollar is a penny on the Yuan.

Kiyosaki’s exploitative thesis is tragically indistinguishable from the Bible for the greater American psyche, and he has now found his way into the algorithms of teenagers praying for a break before they begin. Only through the psychotherapy and large-scale organization of a pro-worker politic can we be rid of the Rich Dad brain cancer. There’s a cost to Kiyosaki’s definition of “financial literacy,” and it is cannibalism.