

Dialogue

By Daniel Alvarez and Kylie Rinker

Our scene takes place at Thanksgiving dinner. Aunt Theresa makes a remark about inflation. Her nephew, Michael, says that the problems are a result of capitalism. They have a productive conversation.

Daniel Alvarez - Michael

Kylie Rinker - Theresa

These characters do not necessarily represent our actual viewpoints.

Theresa: Thanksgiving has gotten so expensive, it must be because of inflation.

Michael: Yeah, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, food prices have gone up 5.3% in the last 12 months. That was in October, things have probably become more expensive since then. Other sectors, like energy, have gone up as much as 30%. The culprit is clearly capitalism.

Theresa: Capitalism? I think it is the democrats fault, look at our gas prices.

Michael: You know gas prices are decided by supply and demand right? I don't think it's fair to blame only the Democrats.

Theresa: Our president makes decisions that can impact gas prices. Therefore the Democrats have something to do with it.

Michael: Well, sure. The Democrats are part of a capitalist institution, though, so the fault really lies in the system. Neither side has our best interests in mind, they just want you to think that they do.

Theresa: Well then what do you think would be a better system?

Michael: I think socialism is the best solution for promoting equality of opportunity so that we can ensure the survival of humans and the environment.

Theresa: Wouldn't socialism make everyone lazy? If everyone is given the same opportunities wouldn't people stop trying?

Michael: I don't believe it would make everyone lazy. Socialism differs from communism in that it strives for equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. If you work harder under a socialist state, you will be rewarded for your hard work. There will still be inequality but it will be the result of choice rather than unchosen disadvantages like race or class.

Theresa: Well in capitalism people are motivated to achieve more because of the poor material conditions they may be born into. This results in a positive good for everyone because we're all benefited by the wealth and jobs that this motivation creates.

Michael: That's not really true. Under capitalism, social mobility is difficult. There aren't a lot of cases of poor and lower class people rising through the ranks to become upper class by the end of their lives. Capitalists like to point to these rare cases, but the truth is that they aren't common. Socialism eliminates class because it grants everyone the same opportunities for advancement.

Theresa: Isn't that bad for the upper class? They wouldn't have as much money.

Michael: Yeah but why should they have more money than everyone else? How is that fair?

Theresa: Well, having less money than someone else causes a competitive environment among the people and their businesses. When someone sees that their neighbor is making more money than they are it might motivate them to work harder. In a capitalist economy, competition creates more innovation. Studies have been conducted, asking workers if they were more or less motivated by competition and the majority of the employees stated that the proposal of competition created a more motivating workspace. As another example, in 1969 the United States landed on the moon. They made it there first because of the capitalist innovations of NASA.

Michael: That's true. We did make it to the moon first, but the U.S.S.R. achieved basically every other space "first." They had the first person in space, woman in space, animal in space, first

spacecraft on the moon and on another planet - the list goes on. I think that this goes to show that the competition of capitalism may not be all it's portrayed to be. NASA was publicly funded, so there wasn't any competition. The advancements that both sides made were in the public sector.

Theresa: I did not know that, but we put a man on the moon first which is more important. The Apollo 11 mission is a symbol of American freedom and individual liberty. Any other system would take that away from us.

Michael: Not necessarily. It depends on how you measure the concept of freedom. Although it is true that under socialism, some personal liberties are exchanged for an increase in the overall well-being of society.

Theresa: It's not my responsibility to worry about other people and their needs. They should be able to provide for themselves. It is unfortunate that other people are disadvantaged but I don't see how socialism is feasible. In my opinion, the government is doing enough with food stamps, welfare, etc.

Michael: I think it's our moral responsibility to care for others, that's part of what makes life worth living. Other people do things for us all the time, like our parents for example, and don't expect anything in return. It's not too far of a stretch to say that we should care about the well-being of others. Capitalism has ingrained in us that there is a law of reciprocity for positive actions when, really, we should just do good things out of kindness and not expect something in return. Giving to others shouldn't mean that we get less in return, life isn't a zero-sum game. Capitalism makes people think that it is because giving to others means less money to take care of ourselves and our families. If the fundamentals were provided for everyone then people would have more time and resources to help others.

Theresa: Ok, I understand that. In order for a person to have morals, they would need to have autonomy and independent judgment. Autonomy is personal free will, someone could be telling you to do one thing but you can choose to do something completely different. You cannot coerce someone to make a decision and label it autonomic. In order for a person to have true positive morals they would need to be able to make their own decisions concerning helping others, if they have no other choice but to help their neighbor it is not really their own morals it is outside pressure. With autonomy comes judgment, which is the human ability to decipher what is right and wrong. Having morality also leads to respect, meaning by obtaining this virtue we have learned how to allow people to make and learn from their own decisions.

Michael: You make a good point. If we're speaking about goodwill in the terms of helping others monetarily, there is no incentive to help others out of autonomic goodwill under capitalism. Individuals can donate to charity, but they often write that off on their taxes if they're donating any significant amount, which means they probably aren't doing it out of pure goodwill. Capitalism, by discouraging helping others, disincentivizes autonomic goodwill. Socialism provides the basics for everyone and guarantees a minimum quality of life, there's no such assurance under capitalism. G.A. Cohen, a brilliant thinker, wrote the book *Why Not Socialism?* In the book, he says that he believes socialism would actually provide a basis for a more charitable society. Inequalities will occur out of differences in taste and choice, but charitable giving will reduce those inequalities and thus reduce the disconnect between individuals. But if you can't agree to that, then what about the global environmental issues that capitalism is creating? Surely you can't defend the destruction of our forests and animals, the very things that support human existence?

Theresa: I agree that the environmental issues are awful, but I think if we could incentivize a shift to renewable energy and prioritize emissions restrictions then we'd be going in the right direction. Eventually, the technological innovation that capitalism cultivates will be able to reverse some of the damage that's been done. The oceans can be cleaned up and trees can be planted without implementing a new economic system.

Michael: Ian Angus, the author of *Facing the Anthropocene*, says that by the time technology is able to help us, if it can, it will do too little and it'll be too late. Capitalism is harming the environment at an exponential pace, meaning that the longer we wait, the worse the destruction becomes each year. As more of the environment is destroyed there are fewer trees and plants to produce oxygen. Many climate scientists believe that we're entering a new geologic era called the Anthropocene. This era is characterized by the huge metabolic rifts that humans have created in the environment. We're pumping so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere that the earth won't be able to sustain life for a lot longer at this destructive pace. The damage is already irreversible but we need to take drastic action to prevent continuing the damage at this pace to ensure the survival of ourselves and future generations.

Theresa: Well, what do we need to do?

Michael: We need to nationalize our industries to prevent further destruction. We can prevent overproduction and produce only what's necessary according to teams of scientists. There are constant inefficiencies and gluts in supply chains under capitalism. All of that could be done away with for the benefit of everyone.

Theresa: Attempting centralized decision-making simply would not work out. In order to be able to successfully make decisions centrally, we would need to have an impossibly large amount of knowledge that we know for sure is true. For example, we cannot assume that something we

believe to be true is true to another person. In a centralized planning setting, there is a lack of knowledge that affects how much of a product to produce. Otteson mentions four aspects that are fatal obstacles that can be applied to the knowledge problem; central planning, personal values, equality, and community. Leading up to their collapse, the Soviet Union used a centralized planning method and the citizens were unable to acquire some of their basic needs, and the conditions for living were overall a nightmare. Within the socialist style of government, there is a lack of proper prices because there is no market dynamic; the seller could set the price to whatever they wanted regardless of the worth. When it comes to buying, selling, trading, etc. inequalities arise. The Day Two Problem is what to do after that occurs. We cannot be sure how to handle the redistribution of the inequalities that were just produced.

Michael: The issues of the Soviet Union, while admittedly bad, are often exaggerated. You should keep in mind that the U.S.S.R. was producing for what was needed, unlike a capitalist society. People talk about the empty supermarkets that were characteristic of the Soviet Union. It's true, there were food shortages, but similarly, if you go to a supermarket in the United States, it's filled with items that people most likely won't buy and will go to waste. Over 40% of the food we produce is wasted. Insert statistic about pig killing thing. Many capitalists like to point to the failures of Cuba while simultaneously overlooking the nations' many successes despite overwhelming opposition from much larger nations like the United States. Under socialism, Cuba's infant mortality rate became much lower than that of the U.S. and its literacy rate rose much higher. All of this was accomplished despite U.S. embargoes and CIA intervention.

Theresa: Cuba was a dictatorship, as are most of the examples of socialist governments. The market concept, despite its inefficiencies, is still a better structure than central planning within the government.

Michael: I agree that the market is necessary for certain things. Central planning doesn't have the local knowledge required to produce regional products or highly niche items. I think that if we nationalize major industries we could depend on local economies for the everyday items that we need like food and clothing. Global corporations should be abolished because they have been proven to be harmful, monopolistic, entities that prey on the third world and abuse the environment.

Theresa: Ok, that is a nice thought but some of the bigger corporations are important. Maybe they could fix the problem by reducing the size of the companies and therefore the harmful effects that they have. I agree that our local economies could produce things that the corporations don't need to which might also help. I still think that capitalism is the only feasible economic system that can ensure freedom, but I see the issues you have presented. I think that we could fix most of our problems while still operating under capitalism.

Michael: That wouldn't fix the issue, large industries still need to be nationalized. According to the Air Quality Life Index, developed by the University of Chicago, we need to take drastic action now. It says that:

“The AQLI data is yet another warning that the stakes are higher than ever to reduce fossil fuel emissions. Working unseen inside the human body, the deadly effects of PM2.5 [pollutants] on the heart, lungs, and other systems have a more devastating impact on life expectancy than communicable diseases like tuberculosis, behavioral killers like cigarette smoking, and even war. Without strong policies to reduce fossil fuels and bring global air pollution levels down to meet the WHO guideline, billions of life-years will be lost. At the same time, climate-induced wildfires will only worsen air pollution, along with other dire climate consequences (2)”

Theresa: Huh, you have a very good point. What about issues concerning the Day Two Problem, though? According to Otteson, these issues involve production and redistribution. If there are no inequalities wouldn't that mean that there is not one person that has more knowledge than the next person? We can all agree that we care about something but we cannot assume that our neighbor might have the same values or prioritize the same things. In order for a centralized planner to be able to efficiently issue redistribution, they would need to survey people to figure out what is desired, figure out whether they planned accurately, determine whether the people acted in accordance with their plans, and figure out what were the flaws within the second and third step. People have their own minds and make their own decisions, which makes this nearly impossible. Within a socialist-inclined government, in order to redistribute anything, the government would have to interfere and slowly more money would be lost in each interaction which could lead to a collapse. This can be seen in the Soviet Union, North Korea, China, or Cuba. None of the economies that use this plan have been successful.

Michael: The day two problem is certainly a large obstacle to contend with. However, I believe that only certain industries would necessitate nationalization. Not every individual need would have to be planned for, thus reducing complications and the need for thousands of bureaucrats. I also believe that the great strides in technology that have been made recently, much in the public sector, would help with planning.

Theresa: What kind of technology are you thinking about? How do you think that technology could be used to produce the best results?

Michael: In the Soviet Union, for example, there wasn't as much technology to make planning more efficient. Now we have advanced algorithms and even artificial intelligence programs that can aid in the process. The specifics are unknown because a system like this has never been tried

in the modern era. It's very bad for capitalist nations to allow socialist states because it means they can't extract the resources from that region for profit. This has led to many CIA-backed coups, murders, and puppet dictators. Capitalists can't pretend that a system founded in imperialism and genocide is the best way for humanity to move forward.

Theresa: Oh wow, I did not think of it like that. I am starting to see the flaws within capitalism. I also still see some flaws within socialism though.

Michael: I'm glad you're coming around to my ideas and I'm very happy that we can have a discussion like this.

Theresa: I agree, I think that this has been a very enlightening conversation. Thank you for sharing your views.

Michael, Theresa, and the rest of the family finish their Thanksgiving meal. They are enlivened by the conversation and propose to do more research together.

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