

Capitalism vs. Socialism: General Thoughts on Bruenig

Yesterday I critiqued Elizabeth Bruenig's opening statement point-by-point. Today, I cover broader issues.

1. Bruenig builds her case on quotes from famous, pre-modern philosophers, interspersed with philosophical jargon. She references virtually no facts from the last two hundred years. When people who *agree* with me make arguments like this, I cringe. How can anyone expect to figure out anything about the real world using this fruitless method?
2. What's the alternative? (a) Focus on arguments, not authorities. If an argument is good, it doesn't matter if Socrates is the source. (b) Use jargon only if no simple English words capture your meaning. If alienation isn't the same as "disliking your job," what is it? (c) Build on the basic facts of the last two hundred years, especially the massive progress in living standards, science, tolerance, numeracy, and the horrors of totalitarianism.
3. I make a real effort not to tar my opponent with the mind-boggling crimes of actually existing socialism. I'm puzzled that she made no such effort on her own behalf. Does she not know? Not care? Deny or minimize the crimes? Plenty of apologists for modern Venezuela, for example, would sound like Bruenig. And victims of such regimes (quite a few of whom personally attend SfL) have good reason to picture blood, hunger, and chains when they hear such words. Why not at least try to ease their fears?
4. Could victims of relatively capitalist regimes reasonably have an analogous reaction to me? I think not. I explicitly acknowledge that actually existing capitalist societies fall far short of the capitalism ideal. Shame on them for tarnishing the reputation of my noble ideals! In any case, almost all of the major crimes committed by relatively capitalist societies have been done in the names of nationalism, religion, and the like. "Don't tread on anyone!" is not a slogan that unites war criminals.
5. Bruenig takes deep moral offense at seemingly unobjectionable actions, like a profit-seeking business hiring a worker. This strange mindset has three distinct consequences. (a) Focusing moral ire on harmless and beneficial behavior. (b) Rationalizing coercion against the innocent people engaged in harmless and beneficial behavior. (c) Distracting moral attention away from enormous horrors that I hoped we could jointly condemn.
6. Example: Socialists observe standard employment conditions with outrage. This in turn leads them to pass onerous regulations on innocent employers, with the textbook collateral damage for workers. But it also prevents socialists from decrying immigration regulations coercively deny most of the world's workers their best route out of poverty. Verily, there are those who would strain out a gnat, yet swallow a camel.

7. Toward the end of the debate, Bruenig asked me about initial property acquisition. How does someone come to own what they own? My live answer was subpar, so I'll try again.

There are many clear-cut cases of righteous acquisition; once we understand them, we can use them to analyze fuzzier cases. What are some clear-cut cases? An individual living alone on an island grows some food, builds a house, carves a sculpture, or quarries some rock. If someone else shows up on the island, the new arrival seems morally obligated to respect that property.* This isn't just "seems to me" or "seems to libertarians"; it's "seems to almost everyone other than self-conscious socialist philosophers." Other clear-cut cases: If two people mutually agree to pool their resources and effort, then split the rewards according to an explicit formula – whether 50/50, 90/10, or whatever. Or: I pay you ten pounds of food to build me a new hut.

If you flatly insist that a person who builds a hut on a desert island isn't morally entitled to exclude a new arrival from sharing it, there's little left for me to say. Otherwise, we can build on these straightforward cases to credibly justify everything from real estate development to malls to multinational corporations. Doesn't any big economic project in the modern world ultimately contain at least a small dose of theft? (I.e., doesn't every skyscraper have at least one stolen brick in it?) Very likely, but in the real world, this rarely turns out to be a serious moral problem.

8. Other than the word "socialism," what part of Bruenig's opening statement would a full-blown alt-right reactionary disagree with? I see the same glorification of an objectively horrific past, the same lack of appreciation of the ubiquitous wonders of modernity, the same misanthropy toward the bulk of humanity, and the same antipathy toward vast outgroups.

9. While I think it's obscurantist to equate self-control with freedom, I agree with Bruenig that self-control is a great virtue. This is especially if you want to be a meritorious thinker. Look at someone like Philip Tetlock, author of *Expert Political Judgment* and *Superforecasting*, among many other works. He's spent decades actually measuring the accuracy of political judgments – and identifying paths to greater accuracy. If you read his Twitter feed, you'll see he practices what he preaches. He doesn't just eschew hyperbole. He constantly searches for evidence from any discipline that goes against his expectations. And he states in advance what would count as error on his part. I won't claim to be at Tetlock's level, but he's a big inspiration for my public betting – and my current record is 17 wins, 0 losses. I didn't get that record with wishful thinking.

When I look at Bruenig's intellectual method, in contrast, I see a deep lack of intellectual self-control. She's trying to understand the world by reading long-dead thinkers she admires. But her admiration lives in a vacuum; she doesn't test the accuracy of her favorite thinkers against broad historical facts, much less search energetically for

distasteful disconfirmation. And as I said, her talk is packed with hyperbole. It feels good, but it's almost always false – and a strong symptom of intellectual self-indulgence.

* Presumptively.