

Capitalism vs. Socialism: Reply to Bruenig

Since Elizabeth Bruenig has posted her whole opening debate statement, I thought I'd reply point-by-point. She's in blockquotes; I'm not. Before I get started, though, let me say that personally, Elizabeth seems a gracious and kind human being. Still, even if I were an avid socialist, I'd be baffled by the way she tackles the issue.

It seems very fitting to me that we should discuss these matters at LibertyCon, as I do agree that we are currently facing a crisis of liberty. The great authors of the Western tradition, the ancients and the late antique and medieval luminaries who laid out the foundations for what remains true and beautiful in our culture, would see us as profoundly unfree.

I spent many years studying intellectual history. Still, my honest reaction: While these "luminaries" were smart, most were also profoundly ignorant and dogmatic – and apologists for the brutal societies in which they lived. Most had near-zero knowledge of what actually sustains the true and beautiful in our culture, namely: science, tolerance, and markets. They have far more to learn from us – both factually and morally – than we do from them.

That said, I suspect the large majority of these luminaries would look at us with amazement. Indeed, when they exited of the time machine, they'd wonder if they'd died and gone to heaven. After all, they'd witness amazingly well-fed, healthy people enjoying a cornucopia of technology and art beyond their wildest dreams. Then they'd learn about the abolition of slavery and serfdom, the amazing progress of women, and the peaceful co-existence of conflicting religions and philosophies. And hygiene. And Netflix.

Would *any* of the luminaries still have the nerve to call us "unfree"? Probably a few misanthropes and hate-mongers like Augustine and Marx, though perhaps even they could be shock-and-awed to their senses by our resplendent world.

There is the first and greatest matter of interior unfreedom. In the Phaedrus, one of his Socratic dialogues, Plato had his mentor liken the human soul to a team of two winged horses led by their charioteer... The bad horse, undisciplined and self-indulgent, is always dragging its poor yokemate and charioteer into pathetic and immoral

behavior; it is unbridled lust and greed and ravenous want, and its domination of its team is the very definition of unfreedom. Nobody ruled by such mad appetites could be said to be truly free.

I agree that Socrates might have this reaction. But even that's unclear; perhaps he'd reach the more sensible view that the human nature is pretty stable. Stoic self-control was rare in ancient times, and remains rare today. And if he were even more sensible, he'd object to Bruenig's hyperbole. In a world with eight billion people, you can find unbridled lust and ravenous want if you search hard enough. But most of the lust is bridled, and most of the want is measured.

Then there is the matter of exterior freedom. In Politics, Aristotle considered the natural slave, "one who is," in the words of Greek philosophy scholar Joseph Karbowski, "naturally suited for slavery..." Aristotle's natural slaves are confined to pursuing the interests and purposes of others, he imagines, by a kind of moral and psychological weakness; so much less binds us to the same sort of existence, performing labor that only serves another person's ends, selling off the possibility of living toward our own...

When I heard Bruenig invoke Aristotle on slavery, I was expecting at least some acknowledgement that modern U.S. workers are freer than ancient Greek slaves. But if I'm reading her correctly, she seems to think that modern conditions are no better, or possibly worse. If so, this is beyond absurd. Even the crummiest job in the U.S. lets workers serve their own end of making money, and spending or saving it as they like. The vast majority of workers also get some satisfaction from being productive and socializing with their coworkers. It's a lot better than historic slavery.

It's something of a shame now to see these greats peering down at us from the occasional courthouse pediment or Cathedral niche. What would they make of us now?

To repeat: Most would be astounded to witness what, to their eyes, would look like heaven. In any case, these "greats" were at best great for *their time*. Few would measure up to modern intellectual or moral standards. And yes, as a moral realist, I say today's

standards are plainly morally superior to those of the pre-modern thinkers who took slavery, persecution, and dictatorship for granted.

We're ruled by passions and owned by things; we have been taught that freedom is a vast blankness defined only by its featurelessness, and we spend our lives laboring at the behest of others, in hopes of surpassing those nearest to us instead of cooperating with them.

Absurd hyperbole. In a world with eight billion people, you can probably find a few that fit most of this bleak description (though I doubt that a single human being has ever been taught that “freedom is a vast blankness defined only by its featurelessness”). But the overwhelming majority mix passion with self-control, and materialism with cherished ties to family and friends.

Capitalism itself sits at the center of a web of mutually reinforcing ideological and material structures which, taken together, diminish human freedom from the inside out, and militate against human flourishing.

What measures of “human flourishing” does Bruenig have in mind? Every measure that social scientists study – happiness, health, leisure, life expectancy, consumption, and beyond – are near their all-time highs in the world’s most capitalist countries.

I. Capitalism and the will

Consider the bondage of the will. Wherever the bourgeoisie has got the upperhand, Marx and Engels observed, “it has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.”

In other words, capitalism brought modern religious toleration. Until Marx’s followers gained power in half of Europe and introduced the most heavenly ecstasies of atheistic fervor.

So the spirit of morally neutral, self-interested utilitarianism came to

displace all that had come before. Hughes noted that “the spirit of modern capitalism appears to be utterly value-free, without substantive commitments, neutral with regard to the question of human flourishing. This follows from its pure instrumentality; it is a concern with methods regardless of goals, means not ends.”

If you wanted to convince students to not bother to read pre-modern thinkers, this would be a good way to do it. What childish hyperbole these “luminaries” write.

Capitalism fosters an obsessive focus on one’s interests, meaning one’s material well-being, and argues that the pursuit of such is an unqualified moral good; it renders sustained contemplation for no other purpose than to know the truth utterly useless and irrational, and largely impossible.

“Largely impossible”? People have far more leisure time today than ever before. I agree that they spend little of it on “sustained contemplation for no other purpose than to know the truth.” But that’s because of the timeless fact that most human beings are philistines. Always have been, and probably always will be. No pre-modern thinker enjoyed the opportunities for Enlightenment that modernity delivers to everyone with Internet access.

It is preferable, for capitalists, that we do not spend any time shaping or educating our wills, and thus they’re simultaneously weak and tyrannical.

Absurd. Capitalists want disciplined, focused workers, and will reward those who possess these traits. Impulsive people in capitalist societies have trouble even holding down a job, as sociologists of poverty are well-aware. Even if you focus on consumers, plenty of firms – such as insurance companies and lenders – want people to be *strong-willed*, because their products offer long-run gain for short-run pain.

II. Capitalism and the world

And yet, capitalism claims to be the political-economic form that most values free choice. The contradiction between the conditions on the

ground and capitalism's self-image perhaps explains why, when you trace its ideological roots, so much time is spent trying to explain how people have consented or agreed to things they obviously haven't consented or agreed to.

A better story is that even relatively capitalist thinkers are over-eager to justify existing governments, which plainly are not consensual. See Mike Huemer's *The Problem of Political Authority*.

John Locke claimed, for example, that by agreeing that gold and silver are valuable, we agree to the unequal distribution of wealth arising from the accumulation of capital;

This is indeed a poor argument on Locke's part, but it's a red herring. No sensible defender of capitalism claims people consent to aggregate social outcomes; that's why Hayek's slogan about society being "the product of human action but not human design" is so widely quoted. Instead, as in Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example, we focus on whether individuals consent to what they're personally doing with their own bodies and their own stuff. (Thus, the capitalist ideal upholds the right of two men to marry each other, even if everyone else is horrified by gay marriage). Then, as I explained in my talk, there's a second set of arguments designed to show that this system leads to good aggregate outcomes.

Thomas Hobbes said that you can still be understood to have consented to that which you were forced to do, even upon pain of death: All it means is that you chose life.

Agreed. Hobbes' argument is Orwellian and silly.

Similar hey-buddy-you-asked-for-this arguments arise in cases where there are no other choices really available, as in the payment of poverty wages and unsafe, sexually abusive or exploitative working conditions.

It's worth pointing out that in pre-modern times, the economy was so unproductive that

almost everyone *had* to live in poverty. And even in the poorest countries, it's normally multinational corporations that provide the best wages and working conditions.

But more fundamentally, almost everyone thinks that we can give morally meaningful consent even when our other option is terrible. As I mentioned in my talk, if you're highly unattractive, your options in the dating market are poor, but that doesn't make dating non-consensual. Similarly, if your productivity is very low, your wages will probably be low too. But why treat the employer as an "exploiter," when no one else on Earth will offer you a better deal?

The illusion of consent only emerges, in this context, to conceal the fact that the average person under capitalism does not really control much of his or her own economic activity, much less his or her own destiny.

Even if you believe that people can't meaningfully consent to work for subsistence wages, what does this have to do with the vast majority of First World jobs that provide living standards that medieval kings would have killed for?

For workers, paradoxically, the fullest expression of their agency (offered under capitalism, that is) is the full alienation thereof. Huw Beynon put it aptly in his account of Working for Ford: "Workers are paid to obey."

Sure, every employer expects you to take his desires into account. Why else would he hire you? But what's so objectionable about the mundane fact that businesses don't pay people to do whatever they feel like doing?

III. Socialism

But it doesn't have to be this way, which is why I've come today to argue in favor of socialism.

Socialism has a range of expressions, and though it's mostly argued against (though rarely, if ever argued for) in its twentieth-century historical forms, the effect of any strands I would advocate would be,

at least, fourfold: 1) to de-commodify labor, and as many other domains of life as possible; 2) to reduce or eliminate workers' alienation from their labor, society, and themselves; 3) to reduce or the vast social and political inequality brought about by capitalism; and 4) to diminish or destroy capital's control over politics, society and the economy.

If someone claimed that North Korea or Venezuela approximated these ideals I'd disagree, but at least understand why it might be plausible. But Sweden, where 70% work in the private sector? Furthermore, while Sweden has relatively low income inequality, it has very high wealth inequality – and it's hard to deny Sweden's richest families have considerable sway over Swedish politics.

We already agree, generally, with the de-commodification of certain goods: education, for instance, is largely de-commodified; there is also a major grassroots movement to de-commodify healthcare. All this means is to protect certain domains from total domination by market-based forces.

“Protected from total domination by market-based forces”? It's more accurate (though still overstated) to say that these sectors are totally *divorced* from market-based forces. The results are predictable: Massive stable waste and low innovation, paid for by exploited taxpayers. Education is a case in point.

...These processes, along with a more general process of de-commodification across the board, will reduce social and personal alienation by transforming the overwhelming competitive impulse in capitalist society into a cooperative impulse. (It's worth noting, I think, that is a goal that sounds unreasonably optimistic only because capitalism sells us the worst possible story about ourselves, imagining human nature as inherently greedy, jealous, destructive and anti-social; this is another way in which our own liberation to excellence is foreclosed for us.)

It also sounds unreasonably optimistic because self-identified socialists have dominated numerous countries without noticeably increasing the cooperative impulses of their citizenry. And don't forget evolutionary psychology.

These four fronts are only a rough sketch of the sort of socialism I envision; my purpose here was to debate for its merits rather than to supply particular policy parameters, which can be left to more talented policy-makers than I. But the moral case, too, is important—primary, even. Socialism represents a moral response to an immoral society, and a harsh rebuke to the commandeering of the modern imagination by individualism, cynicism, competition, misanthropy and indifference. With regard to certain practices and industries, socialists may claim that socialist-style approaches will result in greater utility or efficiency, but the greatest recommendation of socialism is that it is its own moral case, and this is nowhere clearer than in contexts where freedom is held among the highest values.

As I mentioned in the talk, the Orwellian doublethink is palpable. People who do what they want with their own bodies and their own stuff are “unfree.” People who do what socialist policy-makers force them to do are “free.” And frankly, it's Bruenig who seems cynical, misanthropic, and indifferent to me. Yes, people who run businesses want to make money; but most are also glad to create economic and personal opportunities for their workers, and valuable products for their consumers. And my opponent seems totally indifferent to these amazing achievements. I suspect she'll insist that workers and consumers are unwitting accomplices in their own oppression. But again, that seems like a rather cynical and misanthropic view of things. Why not just say that businesses, workers, and consumers are working together in dignity for mutual advantage – and focus instead on the plight of the global poor who are excluded from this glorious marketplace by force of government?