Transcript

Upstream Podcast
Ep 16: The Myth of Freedom Under Capitalism

Featured Guests:

David Bollier: Activist, scholar, author, and blogger focused on the commons and author, most recently, of *The Commoner's Catalog for Changemaking: Tools for the Transitions Ahead*.
Matt Christman: Co-host of Chapo Trap House
Ayesha Khan: Infectious diseases scientist, germ doctor, grassroots organizer, writer, astrobiologist, and educator
Corey Mohler: Creator of Existential Comics
Jessica Gordon Nembhard: Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development in the Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College of the City University of New York and author of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*

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[Upstream theme music]

Men's and Women's voices: You are listening to Upstream.

Robert Raymond: A podcast of documentaries and conversations that invites you to unlearn everything you thought you knew about economics. I'm Robert Raymond.

Della Duncan: And I'm Della Duncan.

Robert Raymond: Join us, as we journey upstream.

Men's and Women's voices: To the heart of our economic system and discover cutting edge stories of game-changing solutions based on connection, liberation, and prosperity for all.

[Fade out music]

Donald Trump: It was that same yearning for freedom, that nearly 250 years ago gave birth to a special place called America…

Margaret Thatcher: I believe you won't keep political freedom unless you also have economic freedom, which means that you must have a large part of free enterprise in your whole economy..

News Anchor: Americans in many of our largest cities would have to work more than 100 hours a week at minimum wage to afford the rent on a one-bedroom home, that's according to a new survey by The United Way…

Ronald Reagan: America is freedom — freedom of enterprise, and freedom is special and rare. It's fragile. It needs production.

Michael Pence: We will not only win a victory for freedom, but come that historic day, we'll be celebrating that freedom reigns in America…

News Anchor: So if you think about the top five issues Americans are concerned about, homelessness would be among the major concerns — it's become an epidemic. Across the country communities are struggling with how to address the issue. As of the new year, people who are unsheltered in the state of Missouri will be charged with a misdemeanor for sleeping on state-owned land. There is a growing list of states and cities making it illegal to sleep outside…

George Bush: And if you give a dang about freedom —should we care in America about whether or not people…

Milton Friedman: The operation of the free market is so essential — not only to promote productive efficiency, but even more to foster harmony and peace among the peoples of the world.

Joe Biden: Freedom, personal freedom is fundamental to who we are as Americans. There's nothing more important, nothing more sacred…

Milton Friedman: Wherever you had freedom, you had capitalism — capitalism is necessary condition for freedom…

Donald Trump: Strong, and proud, and mighty, and free. God Bless America. Goodnight.

[Music: Bing Crosby — Song of Freedom]

Jessica Gordon Nembhard: Freedom of choice is not synonymous with capitalism — capitalism operates under a lot of mythologies and misunderstandings, and that's one of the main ones.

Della Duncan: Jessica Gordon Nembhard is Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development in the Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College of the City

University of New York. She's also the author of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard: We don't have freedom of choice in capitalism because capitalism's main purpose is the maximization of profits for people who already have capital — who already have resources. So it's really about those who have getting more and getting it at the expense of anybody and anything else. And so it's not freedom of choice for the humans that have to rent themselves, that have to rent their labor, that have to hire themselves out in order to make a living — there's no freedom of choice there.

Corey Mohler: Capitalism is, continually in the economic sphere, a system of domination — one person owns the business and they dominate the workers.

Della Duncan: Corey Mohler is the creator of Existential Comics — a webcomic about philosophy and existentialism.

Corey Mohler: Especially in the lower paid jobs, it can be quite complete. Like, low-paid workers can be told what haircut they can have in their free time, you know? They can be told you're not allowed to have tattoos. And they're faced with a decision — do I want to pay my rent or do I want to get the haircut I want to get? And it's obvious which one they get. How can you call that freedom? It's just it's not very coherent.

And you say you're free, if you can — okay, you can quit your job, right? So I'm free. I can quit my job, I can go to another boss. But that's still a system of domination. It's like saying a slave is free if he can choose his master, it's obviously absurd, right?

Ayesha Khan: We're already starting in a deeply inequitable world, and then we're making more inequity and compounding that inequity, the moment you add something like a job that someone has to have in order to live.

Della Duncan: Ayesha Khan is an abolitionist clinical microbiologist, grassroots organizer, writer, and educator.

Ayesha Khan: So who's going to die, right? Who's going to die faster? Who's going to die more? It's always going to be the people that just start off with less. And I think we're all enslaved in a world where we don't actually have community to be able to access food, water, shelter, and love in the way that we need, where it's conditional, it's transactional — that we have to give ourselves up, give our free will choice up in order to live.

And I think I think people see that as, 'Oh, if I work, I have freedom.' But work is the absence of freedom. Work is what we do majority of our lives and the little time that we have, whether we call it weekends or vacations, we spend recovering from burnout. So we're not actually living, we're not free during any of it. People know this deep within them, I think

Matt Christman: Capitalism is the system built on choice and the freedom to choose. But it's really — it's the freedom to make the wrong choice — essentially only.

Della Duncan: Matt Christman is a co-host of Chapo Trap House.

Matt Christman: I mean, not only in the moral sense which is true because it incentivizes — and in fact necessitates — treating people as instruments, denying them their humanity. And that means denying your own humanity.

So it's like the wrong moral choice, but it's also just subjectively the wrong choice. It feels wrong because since our choices, the choices we get to make in capitalism are all meant consciously or unconsciously to sort of fill the hole the capitalism leaves in our lives, that feeling of emptiness and separation the capitalism requires us to operate off of, and it cannot fill that hole, that means that every decision we make, every choice we make, will feel like in some way or another, it was the wrong one.

Because if we made the right choice somewhere along the line, we'd feel better. We would feel more whole. So we just got to blame ourselves for the wrong choices and then try to make the right ones. But under capitalism, there can be no right choice, there can be no choice that fills that hole because the hole cannot be filled, because it is the very matrix of choices that we live in that alienates us from ourselves and from each other and makes it impossible for us to live with a notion of the sacred that can give succor — a deeper succor than any purchase or consumption can't.

[Music: Collections of Colonies of Bees]

Della Duncan: Although its intellectual handmaidens love to insist otherwise — capitalism is *not* a system that truly embodies freedom. We all feel it, of course — that nagging sense that we lack any agency over the choices that shape our lives, the frustration we feel at our bosses, the tension we feel with our landlords, the sense that we're all just stuck in a rat race.

We might lack the language to articulate it, or a framework within which to situate it, but we all know, deep down, that this ain't it. That there's something deeply wrong.

In this episode, we're going to explore why this is — why, despite what we're constantly being told — that we currently live under the freest system ever — that we're not actually free — and why we're all imprisoned within capitalism.

We'll start with a brief history of how we got here, what different conceptions of freedom have meant historically — and how they can be applied to our current condition, and then we'll take a deep dive into the mechanisms this system uses to keep us all imprisoned, and how we can break free.

[Fade out music]

Della Duncan: We'll start in 15th-century England, during the beginning of perhaps one of the most significant events in human history — the enclosure of the commons.

David Bollier: Well, I would start by saying that I think that commons — or really, better, the verb commoning — is kind of the default form of social organization for humanity going back to time immemorial. Because evolutionary scientists will tell us that cooperation has been key to

the advancement of the species, the evolution of the species through language, through sharing new technologies, through many other things. So in some ways there's no singular commons that's pre-modern — there were countless variations across time and culture.

Della Duncan: David Bollier is an activist, scholar, and writer focused on the commons. His most recent book is titled, *The Commoner's Catalog for Changemaking: Tools for the Transitions Ahead*.

David Bollier: But in modern times, we tend to associate the commons with English history, where, in medieval times, commoners, peasants, villagers, others shared the growing of crops in the fields, they shared access to the forest, which was indispensable for the wood they needed, or the acorns for their pigs, they shared pastures, and they often were subservient to a feudal lord. But they had a certain degree of autonomy and control and guaranteed access to the things that were important to their livelihood.

Matt Christman: So the feudal mode of production that preceded capitalism was premised on extraction by elites of agricultural surplus of peasants. Some of them were in a serf relationship, some of them were tenants, some of them were freeholders — but one way or another, they owed some percentage of their labor and produce to lords. And there's an escalating series of obligations — kick-ups, basically, in these noble families that essentially acted as military protection rackets.

But that set up did not incentivize anyone in that chain to more intensively exploit themselves — basically to make agricultural surplus. Part of the big reasons for that is because of the existence of common lands which were accessible by anyone and were where people were able to ensure their own subsistence, regardless of whatever they're putting out for surplus to pay for feudal rents or tribute or to sell on their own because you know that was that was part of the economy was people selling their own surplus — they could still subsist in these common lands.

Matt Christman: And, starting in the 15th century in England, the lords of England began the process of enclosing those Commons, which took about 300 years to complete. And over the course of that time, the peasantry lost access to common lands, which became private land, which is then used to feed sheep for the explosive wool trade, which becomes the key export in the English trade economy.

Della Duncan: The enclosure of the commons removed the possibility of escape from the market and it forced peasants into a situation where they were essentially thrown into a free market for rents. That meant that now peasants and farmers were all incentivized around increasing productivity or else they would lose their land to other, more efficient farmers. This led to the consolidation of landholdings by larger, more efficient farmers.

David Bollier: And this helped accelerate the eviction of people from their villages and commons where they could no longer make a living. And they became the beggars and wage slaves of Charles Dickens's England, albeit this of course happened over a few centuries. But, the basic dynamic was the same — of people no longer being able to survive in their rural commons, moving to the city and the budding industrialization that was going on.

Matt Christman: And — this is the most important part for the creation of capitalism — the growth in the number of landless former peasants who were essentially forced to move to cities

— specifically London, London is the first and biggest in the UK — where they became the first proletarians of the modern era, the people who had nothing to live off of. They had no capital but their own labor, which became accessible to the traders and to the proto-capitalists of the era. And very importantly also created an internal market for things like clothing and foodstuffs that didn't exist as intensely in other countries in Europe because people could grow their own food and make their own clothing. But, increasingly, there is this dispossessed population in England, specifically, that did not have that access to their self-sufficiency and were forced to buy these clothing. And that creates the first internal market, which is key to the explosion of capitalism.

There is, of course, trade — trade defined European commerce, but it was usually trade of goods produced in one place, for goods produced in another, and then transmitted over distances through nodes. This is the first robust internal market for products, not to the elite and the city-goers, the burghers, but for common people. And that was all predicated upon the enclosures — the removal of that safety valve that allowed people to subsist in the face of the market. And if they wanted to opt out of market relationships, enclosure made the opting out impossible. And that is — you don't really have capitalism until you have a situation where everyone at every chain in the mode of production is compelled into a market relationship.

David Bollier: And soon we had the rise of capitalism as a system which, you could say, eclipsed the former modes of organization. And, maybe for the past ten generations only, humankind has been governed by the dictates, the imperatives of capitalism in which private accumulation through capital is the dominant priority of the society — ordering all else through market behaviors. So that's a little thumbnail sketch of the rise of capitalism. But a big part of it is the enclosure of the commons and the freedoms, sovereignty, self-determination, local control that used to prevail.

[Music: Peder – Timetakesthetietimetakes]

Della Duncan: So, capitalism sprang to life in Europe — but we all know too well that the story of capitalism — of enclosure, of privatization, of the emergence of wage-labor, didn’t end in the satanic mills of London.

Since it first reared its ugly head in the world, this system has jumped from host to host, nation to nation, eventually sucking the life out like a vampire squid hollowing out its prey and depleting it of nutrients. So, where else did it infect in this early period?

[Fade out music]

Matt Christman: Well, the original dream of American citizenship was this universalized Baronial rule — the feudal relationships would be dissolved, the hierarchy, the society of orders would be dissolved and a new equal citizenship would be created. But [what] would make it free citizenship is that no one would be able to compel anyone else the way that feudal lords were able to compel their peasants. And the reason that was true is that everyone would own their own land and everyone would have that self-sufficiency that was lost with the enclosures because there was all of this native land to expropriate. And that meant that the whole idea

embodied by the Jeffersonian Democrat Republicans was that yeoman farmers would be able to defend liberty — defined as like the individual autonomy, as opposed to the more socialized conception, more communal conception of liberty that emerges out of class struggle in Europe around the same time — because in Europe that the idea of everybody owning land is absurd. The land is spoken for, there's not enough of it to go around.

In America, there is an idea that at least that generation of Americans can all achieve self-sufficiency, again, through their own ownership of their own land — and a wage relationship is a submission to another power. And so the people who were brought into wage relationships in early America were done so very fitfully, very hostilely. Largely, the wage relationship was dominated by relatively recent poor immigrants who didn't have access to the minimal degree of capital necessary to claim and improve the land. But eventually, even the Yeoman American settlers were forced into wage relationship by the realities of capitalism dominating the agricultural economy. The reality of concentration and efficiency sort of squeezing out smallholders in the same process that occurred in Europe.

Della Duncan: This happened because, over time, producing agricultural surplus requires increasing investment in capital and supplies which, in turn, requiress farmers to borrow against the value of their land, putting them at risk of foreclosure and restricting their ability to work their land on their own terms — and, eventually, forcing them, too, into wage-labor.

Matt Christman: And the Democratic Party emerges sort of out of in large part the reaction of the common wage-laborer to the encroachment of this idea of wage slavery. And then in the South, that anxiety is forestalled by the emergence of caste racial slavery, which creates this distinction between a wage relationship and the skin-branded slave relationship that helps diffuse that.

In the North, it's diffused by the push westward — the continued opening of lands to the west. But eventually this tension explodes after the Civil War in a series of massive labor upheavals starting in the 1870s and extending to the turn of the century.

Della Duncan: This time, known to historians as the period of Great Upheavals, started with The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, and included events like The Pullman Strike, The Steel Strike, The Great Anthracite Coal Strike, The Textile Workers Strike, and perhaps, most famously, the Haymarket Affair, which was, among many other things, a demand for an eight-hour work day, which ended in a bloody massacre and is considered to be the origin of May 1st — International Workers' Day. Although labor won many battles during this tumultuous time, ultimately, it was capitalism which would eventually emerge victorious.

Matt Christman: What emerges out of that, out of that struggle, is the full imposed imposition of the wage relationship — except for those remaining people, at that point, still eighty percent of the population, who are farmers, but which will rapidly shrink over the course of the 20th century. But it's essentially a frog in a bucket situation. People are horrified by the imposition, by the concept of wage slavery being imposed upon them. But as it happens, it happens individually to individuals rather to groups of people.-

I mean, over time, it's just imposed the same way that enclosures were. And at the end of it, we have a new notion that has assimilated the notion, the idea of a wage relationship, and replaced the self-sufficient homestead with the private mortgaged home and, you know, quarter acre lot as the stand in for what had been like a real sufficiency. And now you can't grow your own

crops, you can't sustain yourself off of what you can produce on your quarter acre in the suburbs. But it still stands in for that lost liberty.

Corey Mohler: The term wage slave, of course, has been used throughout American history and in other countries as well. Like, Abraham Lincoln, who was no communist, openly said, “Yeah, we want to end slavery and we want to end wage slavery next.”

Della Duncan: Here’s Corey Mohler again.

Corey Mohler: I think it was more obvious back then because, like, in early American history, like in the — I remember reading about the steel factories and they would work sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, and they had one day off — the early steel factories — and that day was the 4th of July to celebrate how great America was, right?

So. when you look at these people, first of all, it's obvious that they're not choosing — the word freedom should never enter anyone's mind when that situation occurs. And you can look at it and it looks much closer to slavery than what we have today. Obviously, today things are easier — we have a much more industrialized society. So ,you're going to work and you can fool yourself into thinking you're a little free because just things are generally easier — we're in the most comfortable time in human history, the most wealthy time in human history. But the relationship between workers and capital hasn't changed. And that's still a master-slave relationship. Or, maybe, if you're uncomfortable with the word slave, it's a master-servant relationship or whatever. But, yes, to have a full account of human freedom, you have to end the system of domination where one person commands and one person obeys — that is fundamentally a master-servant relationship, no matter what you do.

Della Duncan: The emergence of capitalism looked different from region to region, from country to country — the process here in the United States was a little different than in Europe. But the rise of capitalism has always included certain procedures — namely, the enclosure and privatization of common land, and proletarianization — the coercion of groups of people (often racialized) into an arrangement where they had to sell themselves to an employer on the employer's terms.

This loss of autonomy and the coercion of the mass of people into wage-labor is something that we now simply take for granted. But it’s important to remember that people fought — often to the death — to avoid this fate in the early days of capitalism. They legitimately saw it as a form of slavery — hence the term, wage-slave.

But as wage slavery was becoming the dominant socioeconomic relationship in the United States for most people, Africans and African descendents — along with many Indigenous communities — were being forced into a much more horrific form of slavery — chattel slavery, which itself was an integral element in the capitalist project. We cannot separate form of slavery from capitalism either — they existed to support and uphold one another in very fundamental ways. And even when slavery was officially abolished in the United States, African Americans were still subjected to forms of enslavement by other names.

[End music]

Jessica Gordon Nembhard: African Americans still experience slavery in many different ways.

Della Duncan: Here's Jessica Gordon Nembhard again.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard: The first way I would say would be the sharecropping and as I said, the perpetual debt peonage — sometimes they were farming the same places where they had been enslaved. You could work 24 hours a day and you still could never get out of debt. You could never get your head above water, you could barely feed your family, that kind of thing. So that was one way that slavery was perpetuated.

Another way is actually what's called the convict-leasing system. And it's again, after the Civil War, especially after the reconstruction period, many states started passing laws that actually made it illegal not to work. So it was illegal to be unemployed, illegal to be in debt, illegal to be what's called the vagrant, right? To be homeless — to be standing around in the street. And so what does that mean if that's illegal? That means you get arrested and you get put in jail. Once you're in jail, they then leased you out back again to a plantation owner or a mine owner or whatever — leased you, out and basically you were doing slave labor. You didn't get to control that labor because you were in jail or in prison. They leased you out and got the money that was paid by the former plantation owners.

And it was legal in our Constitution because the 13th Amendment, which abolished enslavement, has a clause that says slavery is abolished except for people duly convicted of a crime. So you make poverty and joblessness a crime, and then people are duly convicted of it, and then you can enslave them.

Also, just labor in prisons, even if it's not convict leasing, is basically slave labor. If you look at the conditions, right, a lot of the prisons don't have to follow federal OSHA policies, OSHA health and safety policies. They don't have to pay minimum wage. And so even if you're working in a prison and not leased out to somebody else, it's still basically slave labor. And that, you know, that's continuing to this day. And you know that [the] United States has the highest percentage of its population behind bars. And the majority of those people are Black and especially people of color — Black and Brown people are the majority of the people behind bars. And so we still basically have slavery by another name.

And, again, we couch it in this mythology that people deserve it because they are convicted of a crime. But if you look at what they're convicted of, even today, we don't necessarily convict people of loitering and unemployment as a crime, but we still — having mental illness, having drug addiction — all those things are still considered crimes. Plus, we also know that we have a huge, high rate of innocent people behind bars that have been targeted to be put behind bars when they're actually innocent of the crime — in addition to they may be innocent because they have health and mental health issues that should be dealt with in a different way. So those are kind of the big, broad ways.

But also, I would say our whole capitalist system is kind of a slavery system because you don't have a lot of choices about who to work for, where to work, for what the conditions are. We definitely are — even if we have so-called, 'a good job,' you know, it's still basically wage theft

because we're never — we're not really paid what we're worth. We're not paid — most of us are not paid an appropriate salary for the work that we do, because, again, capitalists are maximizing profit, which means they have to minimize costs and labor is a cost.

And so, in some ways, you know, the 99 percent, or at least the 80 percent of the population, are doing slave labor still and not compensated properly. And then there's so many people of color who are still specifically targeted and have the least opportunities who are stuck in this slavery kind of slavery and wage slavery.

Ayesha Khan: People talk about prisons in America as a form of legal slavery, but even that, I feel like, is not thinking about it big enough.

Della Duncan: Here's Ayesha Khan again.

Ayesha Khan: And I think in the same way, thinking about, you know, jobs as a form of slavery is still not thinking big enough. I think, just communicating to people that if your survival is contingent on something — not contingent on you caring deeply or showing up for your community — but contingent on you doing X, Y, Z things, and then you know, whether you can and can't do that — whether you can and can't get a job, what kind of job you get is going to be dictated by the privilege that you hold.

Ayesha Khan: Late stage capitalism does a really good job of making it very difficult for us to see that we're enslaved, making it very difficult for us to even identify who our oppressor is because we don't have someone coming to our door, putting a gun to our head very viscerally and forcing us to work, right? It might be more obvious with prisons, for example, the prison industrial complex, right? Someone is incarcerated and they're forced to work with little to no wages. Okay, but I actually think it's worse when you don't realize that's what's happening to you, but it's just made a lot more palatable so you don't see it. So, when someone doesn't come to your door, but since the day you've been born, they socialize you, they normalize you not being free, they normalize you not having the right to live, they normalize you having to constantly prove yourself because you have zero worth and value unless you generate profit for someone else, then you're going to do it to yourself.

So for the longest time, me, and many people — almost all people on this planet — will willingly say, "You know what? I chose this job. I chose to have this career path. I chose to be here. So I'm going to point a gun at my own head and self-optimize, be more self productive, self-inflict, self-discipline" — and that is what capitalism is and the form that it takes today.

And I think that's a lot more insidious in being still slavery, but we just don't see the slave master actively lashing at us. And that's almost worse because we don't know where our pain is coming from. So it takes a lot more, I think, to get to the bottom of that type of pain and that type of suffering, because covert violence is a lot harder to point out than overt violence.

[Music: Golden Brown — Mammoth Star]

Della Duncan: So, we've talked a bit about why capitalism is antithetical to freedom in a lot of practical ways, but it might be helpful here to really explore what we *mean* by freedom more concretely — to do this, let's take a brief interlude and explore some different philosophical conceptions of freedom. Here's Corey Mohler again.

Corey Mohler: In the early social contract theory, there was differences between Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau as well. And Hobbes gave sort of the most brutal version of the social contract theory where human beings, in order to attain safety, had to give up all power to *The Leviathan*, meaning the king — literally supporting an absolute monarchy to have power over everyone, because it would be best for everyone to just basically give up their freedom to the king to ensure that they're not just going to shoot each other, right? He said, you're still free in the state as long as you're not physically forced to do something. Like, so, if someone grabs you and puts you in a lake, you didn't freely go into the lake because they pushed you in, right? He says, other than that, it's a free choice.

So, of course, philosophers say, "Well, what if a robber comes on the highway and says, 'Your money or your life?' And Hobbes bit the bullet, like these philosophers do, and said, "Look, it's still a free choice because your freedom was exercised." Now, obviously, a lot of other philosophers jumped on him and said, "This is totally ridiculous, you're still being coerced, right?" And this gets to the heart of the *work or starve* dilemma that the workers face. If you're born with absolutely nothing, you're in a 'your money or your life' situation. You're going to work for me for however many hours I say, you're going to show up and do whatever I say, or you're going to be homeless. And an enormous number of Americans are really, really close to being homeless — like, closer than people think. You know, it's like, that isn't freedom.

And in philosophy, this is called, like, negative freedom. Like the absence of coercion.
And there's also positive freedom. And this is what people like Rousseau were taking further. Like there's also the freedom to not starve to death — that's, like, a kind of freedom. And I don't even remember who said this, I think it actually might have been a standup comedian, but it really has stuck in my head for a long time, he said, if you want to know how free you are in America, if you want to know what freedom means in America — you think Americans are free? Just do one thing for me — go to any major city and show up with no wallet and no money and see what kind of freedom you have. You won't have the freedom to be warm, you won't have the freedom to eat, you won't have the freedom — you can't get a hotel — you can't do anything. You literally can't do anything.

So, when we talk about freedom, there has to be a kind of — it can't just be a lack of coercion, of explicit coercion. There has to be a kind of positive freedom. In order to exercise true human freedom, you have to have a capacity to exercise that freedom — and that's what philosophers would call positive freedom. And that's kind of what's missing from the equation of when, like, libertarian, right-wing libertarians say, "Oh, well, you have explicit freedom." You're like, "that's not enough." You have to have the ability to exercise your freedom. And for that you need — in America, you need money. But in a non-capitalist society, you know. society would be structured in a way that people could participate in society while exercising their freedom.

Della Duncan: The constant pressure in capitalism to generate income is a form of coercion that differs from having a gun pointed at your head — but in essence, it has the same result. Without fully realizing it, we've all been trapped within a prison that has been meticulously constructed to make it feel like we are exercising free choice, when in reality we're just choosing

between different ways of not starving to death. We're all compelled into the market, whether we like it or not — and nothing about that is voluntary.

Corey Mohler: When you have a voluntary contract, you know, under capitalism, if you are born with no money, which is the majority of people — if you're not born with money, everybody knows you have to sell your labor to survive. And who do you have to sell it to? You have to sell it to the people who have money, right? So, yes, it's voluntary to choose to get hired at a job, right? But, again, there's something very suspicious at this. Like, do you know what job most people choose? They all almost choose the same job — whoever's hiring, that's the job they choose.

Most people don't reject — like, especially the more poor you are, they don't reject four or five jobs before they accept the job that they choose. Most people accept the first offer. So, it's like, the people at McDonald's, you think they chose McDonald's? No, they went there because it's hiring. So what is the choice? How is it a voluntary choice if you just have to pay rent and then you go to a job and you accept the very first job that offered you a position? It doesn't seem like much of a choice was made there or an expression of human freedom in the part of the worker. It's not a voluntary association — it's just not an expression of authentic freedom.

Ayesha Khan: I think the word freedom, the way people define it today, has been desecrated and sort of defiled and ruined and co-opted by capitalism. So freedom, I think, has been — it's again, one of those words that we use a lot, but we don't really realize what it means. I don't know how many people have been, like, sat down and just asked, what does it mean to be free? Like, what would I need to feel free? And it goes back, I think, first, to have our basic conditions and needs met — our basic survival resources that we need. The only way we can really be free is if we're not living every day from paycheck to paycheck, If we're not living every day worrying about where our next meal is going to come from.

And the majority of the people on this planet — no matter what we shroud it with superficial layers of comfort — majority of the people on this planet, 99 percent of us, are about one or two personal health crises away from being unhoused. One major health crisis, a death of a loved one, one major natural disaster, for example, that destroys your home — we're all just one or two steps away from being unhoused. And that basically creates a constant fight or flight that we've just normalized. Now, any form of abuse, torture and oppression can be normalized if it's titrated and gradually exposed to you over time. And that's exactly what capitalism does. So we don't even know that we've never been free.

And a lot of people think within the confines of their cages, they've taken the values of the empire on as their own. So they think freedom is oh, accumulation of wealth, accumulation of accolades and trophies. And all of that is just capitalism's gradual brainwashing of us over time to tell us all the things we should be. And people don't realize that has shaped our core identity. So we've spent our whole life largely being defined by ambition or value or dreams and aspirations that are not really our own — that have been put into our minds. And we've been told this is what you have to do to be considered a worthy, good individual in society. And if you don't do that, on the one hand you could die because capitalism isn't a choice — it's get bread or get dead. If I don't participate in the system, I don't know where else — I've been separated from my land. My connection to my land has been severed. So I can't grow my own food. I can't build my own house. And that's what capitalism does really well. It holds you hostage. It slowly commodifies and objectifies everything. And that includes us. We're merely products that can be extracted or exploited for profit generation.

Similarly, food has been turned into a product, shelter as a product, health is a product. And therefore, to access any of that, all you can do is turn yourself into a product and then sell yourself to the highest bidder. And that's not a choice. So we're not free. And it's ironic when people even think of getting their quote unquote dream job as any form of freedom. It's just, you know, a slightly more palatable form of chains.

What capitalism does is it isolates us. And what we end up facing, if we're not critical, is we end up facing a very slow, long, gradual, prolonged death. So we're all just waiting to die very slowly and we're sick and we don't even realize how we're sick, because being in this society and under these conditions has been so normalized. And that's the thing — capitalism claims to, to create innovation and creativity, but all it does, it kills innovation and creativity because fear is not a sustainable motivator. And that's what we're all doing under capitalism. We're afraid, every day — since the day we've been born we haven't had the right to live, which means we've never had basic safety and stability and security.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie — Is That You or Are You You]

Della Duncan: The system of wage-labor — and the prison that it serves as — is upheld through modern capitalism by a number of different mechanisms. These mechanisms, just like the entire system itself, operate somewhat invisibly — we take these things for granted. Sure, they give us headaches and we love to complain about them with our friends and neighbors, but we rarely regard them as an intentional set of rules designed explicitly to keep us in chains. One of the main examples of these coercive mechanisms is the US healthcare system.

Universal healthcare would save corporations a massive, massive amount of money — but almost none of them support it. In fact, they actively lobby against it. Why?

Corey Mohler: Universal health care, like Medicare for All, will save the business class an enormous amount of money and they're still against it. You think your employer wants to pay for your health care? It's a huge loss to every single company in America that they have to pay their workers' health care. And yet they come out and guess what? They don't want the government to do it. Why? Because that's like a power point — they have control over your health care. So it makes it so you're a lot more hesitant to quit or change jobs — it just gives the workers less bargaining power.

It's the same reason why every company on earth will spend more money to defeat a union than to give in to the union's demands — it will happen every single time — two or three times more money, often, to defeat the union. Because a lot of it is about power. They don't want the workers to have power over their own lives. They don't want to have workers to have power over the workplace, a say, they don't want them to, you know, if they tell you to work on Saturday, they don't want you to say, hey, fu—you know, screw you, I'm in a union. Talk to the union. They want you to just be like, Well, they're going to fire me if I don't — I better do it.

So a huge amount of it is about power and nobody wants to talk about it because they use these words like freedom, whereas it's not really about freedom — it's a power struggle.

Matt Christman: Yeah. I mean, there is an unconscious solidarity among owners in that they might not cooperate consciously, but they all have an identical interest in seeing their leverage in any situation liquidated and destroyed in favor of their own. And they'll encourage anything, even at individual cost, that maintains their power dynamic relative to the workers.

Della Duncan: Not only does a healthcare system tied to employment make it difficult to move between jobs, giving individual employers an immense amount of power over us and restricting our freedom of movement within the prison of wage-slavery itself, it also makes it extremely difficult to really exit that prison — it makes it difficult to exit wage-labor and become either self-employed or to just do anything outside of the wage-labor system.

Matt Christman: It's effectively impossible for many people to get private insurance to pay for insurance that is not being subsidized by an employer. Even in capitalism's own terms, which the idea that it maximizes freedom, and specifically in America, where small business ownership replaced, in many respects, the yeoman farmer ideal as the way to be self-sufficient. Okay, I have to have a job and I have to have a bank account and I have to have money to live — but if I own my business then I am not at anyone's beck and call, I am not anyone's wage slave. And, in fact, I get to have wage slaves and boss them around and that is the dream. But that dream is hampered in a lot of cases in this country because to strike out on your own is to give up the insurance you have as whatever job you're at, and uploading that cost onto a new small business is too much for many people. And a lot of people are not given even the freedom to pursue that small-holder dream because of the fact of private insurance.

Della Duncan: Another mechanism this system uses to keep us all tethered to wage-labor is commodified housing. We've all gotta pay the rent, right? This also severely limits our ability to even temporarily exit wage-labor.

Matt Christman: Just the systematic reality of people falling out of the ability to fucking keep a roof over their head because of the skyrocketing and ever upward trending cost of living in American cities and cost of housing specifically in American cities, which is — that's how cities at this point, their economies work. Upward property values is the engine of the entire urban economy.

Matt Christman: The solution here is everyone knows is to provide housing — to build housing. But not only would that have the effect of potentially lowering property values by making more housing stock and making there less competition over more properties, but it would also short circuit the sham — the social contract that we live under because people would ask the question, rightly, "Well, how come those people get a house and I have to work to keep the roof over my head?" And that is a very good question. Why is that?

The fact is that homelessness — and the public and devastating homelessness that now is on display in American cities — is a very important tool of coercion. But because it's people — "Hey, they stop being able to pay their bills and now they're in the street." That's all individual choices that led to that. Even though you see that whether or not people become homeless — individually, yeah, you can chart an individual's course to homelessness by a bunch of decisions and you can smugly say," Oh, they made the wrong decision here, here and here." But you see that it is the larger tides of economic fortune that push people in large groups into homelessness over time. And that is just the reality of housing prices in an environment of constricting employment opportunities.

And there is no current political formation that has any chance of wielding power in America that could address that context because it's the generative basis for everything that both parties and all the political power structures in American cities and states and at the federal level depend upon.

[News clips]

News Anchor: A new law in Missouri just took effect in the new year, making it illegal for homeless people to sleep on state land…

News Anchor: Eric Burger with Shelter KC is concerned about the new law criminalizing those without a home…

News Anchor: And that means homeless people can't sleep in parks, under bridges, or on sidewalks — really anything owned by the state, and now that enforcement falls on the city…

News Anchor: As of the new year, people who are unsheltered in the state of Missouri will be charged with a misdemeanor for sleeping on state land. There is a growing list of states and cities making it illegal to sleep outside. Right now, if you're in Tennessee, and you live in a tent, it's a felony. Portland, Oregon is banning tent living and shifting homeless into city-sanctioned mass encampment sites, and the city of Los Angeles is banning tent cities near schools and daycare centers.

News Anchor: It makes sleeping or camping on state lands without permission a crime — a class C felony. It's a warning the first time, but after that it could mean up to $750 in fines and fifteen days in jail — that's if the person refuses to be moved to a shelter…

Jessica Gordon Nembhard: So the new law in Missouri, that it's illegal to sleep on state land, is back to what I was talking about earlier, about creating laws that make it illegal, illegal to be poor or without a home or without a job, etc.. And it just allows us, again, to put people behind bars and then use their labor — enslave them. We still — the 13th Amendment still says it still exists, we haven't changed it, so it still says that slavery is abolished except for people who are duly convicted of a crime. And so if now the crime is being homeless and you're convicted of that crime and put in jail, you can be enslaved legally.

It's another way, first, to penalize people for capitalist exploitation, because basically anyone who's without a home, who's homeless, it's because of capitalist exploitation, i's because the capitalist system has commodified housing and made it so that only people who have certain amount of money can actually afford to have a place to live. And then if you've got states and governments that then say, "Okay, well, the capitalists are allowed to make you homeless because they don't hire you or they don't pay you enough to have a home, or they speculate on the land so that housing is too expensive, but we're going to go even further — we're going to say if you if you try to live somewhere or try to sleep somewhere on state property, you know, that's illegal and we'll lock you up." What is that, double jeopardy or triple jeopardy right there, just supporting the capitalist system and making it even worse.

[Music: Do Make Say Think — The Landlord is Dead]

Della Duncan: The Missouri law is actually just one of the latest of its kind. According to a report published by the National Homeless Law Center titled “Housing Not Handcuffs,” as of 2021, 47 states in the U.S. have anti-homeless legislation.

These laws are just one of many ways that the capitalist class is trying to entrench and solidify our imprisonment within the system. And although this usually happens in more covert ways, the COVID-19 pandemic was actually an incredibly clarifying event when it comes to this kind of class warfare.

Many capitalists, and their intellectual handmaidens, were caught saying the quiet part loud — like in this little gem from Fox News host Laura Ingraham and reality TV star and hospitality business consultant Jon Taffer — one of the most mask-off moments of the entire GOP revolt against the enhanced unemployment assistance that was provided during the early stages of the pandemic.

Jon Taffer: I’m not an economics professor — if you get $800 a week unemployment benefits, and you live with a partner who also is getting $800 a week unemployment benefits — $1,600 a week, Laura — $83,000 a year for that household in unemployment benefits. The median income in America is only $63,000. We’re incentivizing people to stay home. What if we gave that additional unemployment benefits to employers to incentivize people to go to work?

Laura Ingraham: Well, what if we just cut off the unemployment? I mean — hunger is a pretty powerful thing. I’m talking about people who can work…

Della Duncan: Another especially cartoonish example of class war during this period happened in early 2022 when a hospital system in Wisconsin sought to temporarily prevent employees from leaving for other jobs. Although it was eventually lifted, a temporary injunction — an actual court order — blocked seven employees of ThedaCare, a major regional hospital system, from leaving for new jobs with another health care network until it could find people to replace them.

During this period of time, these employees, who had been fighting for higher wages at Thedacare, were actually restricted from getting new jobs, forcing them to stay with their current employer. Talk about freedom?!

But It’s not just healthcare and housing, it’s food, water — *everything* in capitalism has been commodified and tied to money, everything is financialized and made into a transaction in the marketplace. Not only is this not the only way to live, it’s *no* way to live.

Ayesha Khan: Capitalism makes our relationships transactional because we're buying everything on the market. The things that are keeping us alive, are our survival resources that are supposed to be sacred, like food, we're buying it as products that have been commodified on corporate aisles. And what that does is it separates us from everything that we actually need to survive.

And so, similarly, the word health, I had to ask myself, like, what does it mean to be healthy? We use that word all the time — wellness, health, self-care. What do those words mean? What does it mean to be a healthy human being? And how can we even understand that when the planet that we live on is being drilled into and and tankers are pouring, pouring oil into our oceans? So what does it mean to be healthy? And as I kept asking those questions, I think it

was very obvious that our health is directly tied to the health of the lands that we're on and the planet's health in general and everything on it.

And then thinking about what conditions do we need to be healthy — like baseline conditions, right? We need our basic needs to be met. And that means you have food, water, shelter, but also community care and love. Everything begins with giving people the basic conditions that they need to actually survive and thrive. And, for example, we're meant to be raised by a village, not just two people. And even if you can think and envision that if I was born into a village, if I was born into a village where I was connected directly to my land, and that connection was fostered, that we grew the food that we ate, that we intentionally were entangled in a web of intimate relationships with other flora, fauna, microbes in our system to try and understand how do we sustain the ecosystem that we're living in. It's not hard to realize that that's really the baseline health that I would have ever had, and we've never had that.

Della Duncan: Well, we have had that — at least elements of it — prior to the domination of capitalism, prior to the enclosure of the commons, prior the commodification of everything. And we *can* return to that reality — and build on it. In fact, many already are.

David Bollier A commons occurs whenever a group of people collectively decide they want to manage a bit of shared wealth for their shared benefits —

Della Duncan: Here's David Bollier again.

David Bollier: With an accent on everyone's participation, fairness, and the long term sustainability of that resource. And there's no master inventory of commons, it takes place in digital spaces like open source software, it takes place in cities — the whole urban commons movement you see in Europe today — there are traditional and Indigenous commons, especially associated with forests and farmland and wild game and irrigation water.

There are all sorts of, basically, social commons which people have associations in which they want to manage, for example, a community garden or community land trusts. There's alternative currencies — and so there's a huge variety of commons out there. But all of them are trying to enable people to have freedoms that markets only provide if you have the money. And of course there's immediately there a privileging of those who are wealthy and have the money.

So the commons, you might say, democratize and make far more accessible, so first of all, the meaning of basic needs essential to life, but second of all, the certain creativity to be self-determined in how you meet those needs and to have all of your needs as a human being met, and not just your transactional needs through markets, as a consumer, say, or as a worker.

So, in other words, the commons is a broader template or matrix for fulfilling our humanity. And these can work at both — they tend to be at smaller scales where things can be more accountable and negotiable and person-to-person, but they can often take very large scales such as Wikipedia, which has tens of thousands of contributors across several dozen languages, and yet they're federated enough to manage themselves.

So, you could say the commons are under-theorized and people — economists, politicians, media don't have the reference points for even understanding them in their broader scope, let alone in a theoretical or generalized way. But, let's just say they're out there, they're robust, they're also bumping up against conventional capitalist and state systems, which is a source of

structural tension. And I think that things will be tumultuous as we try to rediscover a past that we abandoned 500 years ago — but it has to be done.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie — Short Song 020923]

David Bollier: People often ask me, you know, “Oh, I love that idea of the commons — what can I do?” And I think it has to start with, What are your talents? What are your passions? Where do you live? What's within arm's reach? And who are the peers with whom you can work? Because through all sorts of obscure, isolated, disaggregated collectives like that, brilliant ideas have poured forth to go viral. You know, Richard Stallman, the famous hacker at MIT who was behind the free software movement, was just a single guy who was pissed off that he couldn't fix the Xerox machine because it was proprietary software. And, you know, it's like, these kinds of individuals with a certain determination and creativity and persistence is what has driven forward the commons over time — especially in a time of pervasive capitalism.

But I’d just like to say that there are so many diverse inspirational commons out there — some of them very traditional, some of them very avant, digitally, for example. Certain progressive forms of digital ledger technology or holochain — things like that, digital autonomous organizations. But I also think of the Global South is such a repository of wisdom and knowledge on this that the modern west of capitalist modernity really should start to pay attention to the relational provisioning dynamics of commons there. We have things to learn from them just the way certain community land trusts have learned a lot from Indigenous peoples — how to manage land, how to steward it properly, how to manage a community. So there's a lot that we need to learn. But the first step comes from unlearning, or at least historicizing what we think we know. And the second means jumping into the deep end of some of these alternatives.

[Music: Ryley Walker — Rocks on Rainbow]

Jessica Gordon-Nembhard: For me, the goal of economics is for everybody, human beings, to responsibly create social reproduction and innovation in ways that will survive, through that notion of seven generations, which we get from Indigenous people, right, this long term survival. We want our planet to survive so we need Mother Earth to be strong, we need human beings to be strong and supported. And human beings — the best way for human beings to have those economic gains are to do it collectively through economic democracy in a just way.

And so for me, the goals of economics are to make sure that human beings can work together so that we all prosper, so that we share in the decisions of how to do things and how to best do things so that we can all prosper. And in ways that, for now, in this period that we're in, some of us are so oppressed and exploited in this system that we have to have a goal for economics to also be liberatory.

And the only way to be liberatory is to reject capitalism and be in favor of solidarity, cooperative economic systems, and to go back to those first systems of mutual aid and economic solidarity — that really is where human beings started. And we need to reclaim and regain that as the main kind of economic activity and economic structures where we do things together, we use

our collective economic energies and activities, we decide things together, we create things together, we produce things together, we exchange them fairly and in solidarity ways — and we do it all so that we can have enough prosperity, so that we can the next generations can continue and be prosperous.

Ayesha Khan: Strong communities are free — and strong communities are made up of strong relationships. And strong relationships are things that we can build today. And we don't have to wait for this hypothetical utopia. But every day we can show up in our relationships and show up by being more reciprocal and investing more time and energy and resources in trying to think of how we can actually provide for each other, because strong, strong relationships lead us to supporting each other. And when you have a strong community backing you up, you're much less likely to willingly be exploited. You're just going to say, “I don't need this. I don't need this abusive job. I don't need this exploitative employer — I have a community that I can care about.” And that's what mutual aid is.

And we're already doing that for each other. We're already doing that for each other in many different ways. Like I, for example — we had a snowstorm that blew through many parts of the South and obliterated my apartment. Our roof collapsed, our pipes burst, and it was extremely unexpected. But I think capitalism has drilled into us this idea that if we ask for help, if we admit that we cannot survive alone, which we can't, whether we like it or not, we are an interdependent species, just like all living beings, and we need each other — that it's a moral failing if we seek help. But when I did, there was an outpouring of like support and people showing up in many different ways, part of which led me to finding alternative temporary housing until we sort of do damage control. And I think that — and many other examples, are mutual aid. Showing up in our relationships to take care of each other every day is mutual aid.

And I think the only way we can be free is if we are free as a collective. I know as an individual of whatever — you know, individual individuality is an illusion because I'm not self-made. I'm community made. Everything I am is an amalgamation of all the people and plants, animals and microbes that I have, that I've managed to interact with in my lifetime that have somehow got me to be me in the way that I am. So there is no individual per se. But still, if I were to think of myself as an individual being, I feel the most free when I'm supported, I feel the most free when I know that I have people that care about me. I feel the most free when I know that I can do the things that I care deeply about without having a guillotine hanging over my head, which is what capitalism does. That's ultimately how we're — how I feel most free. And when I feel free is how I'm the best that I can be in terms of the most creative I can be, the most giving, I can be the most compassionate I can be. That's the best way I can show up for my community when I'm free.

So oddly, if we even want to build the best world that we can think of, whatever that is, that requires people to be free, not be chained. And threats of capitalism uses one and one thing only to as a motivator, which is fear. Fear is not sustainable. Fear is something that people will fight through. Fear is not enough to crush resistance — it's never been. All empires have fallen. But love — love is sustainable. Love is the most sustainable motivation because it's regenerative. Love for land — as you take care of the land that you're on, your land takes care of you. Love for people — you can be in reciprocal relationships. And even like, you know, beyond my time here on earth, once I die, my remains will then go on to support and provide nutrients for other life forms.

So I think being free is about being loved and cared for and also doing that in a reciprocal way where we give and intentionally cultivate those relationships rather than just sort of waiting for them to happen for us.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie — Short Song 012023]

Corey Mohler: So the philosopher that's most associated probably in people's mind with the term freedom today is Jean-Paul Sartre. And he had a conception that's called, like, radical freedom, where we have a certain metaphysical freedom of our consciousness that allows us to make decisions that cannot be removed — no matter what happens, we're free. And this sort of sounds like a libertarian view of freedom that might lead him to right wing libertarianism. He even said, even further than your money or your life that Thomas Hobbes said was a free choice, he says, “Even if you're shackled into a prison, all four hands shackled down, you can't even move your head left or right, you still have freedom because it cannot be taken away from you, because you have the freedom to interpret your condition.” You could be happy with the situation technically, right? So again, these philosophers like to go all the way and bite the bullet and say, “Look, you're free no matter what. There's nothing they can actually do to take away your freedom, your metaphysical freedom.”

But then when you go and you start to say, Well, how should society look to foster this freedom? Both him and de Beauvoir, who — they were partners and they basically have the same philosophy, says, “Look, you have to have a communist society, you have to destroy the class system”. And the reason is, like, Beauvoir writes about this most in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, like, if you were to take your conception of freedom, it's like what they would call bad faith to say, I should be free, but other people should not.

So it's a bad faith argument to have what they would call, what communists would call, like, bourgeois freedom, where you're, like — you picture a rich person, he's free to write novels, ride horses in the country and all this stuff. And the reason he's free is because he has servants in his house to wash his dishes, to bring him food, to cook everything. He has workers at his factory to make him money. He doesn't do anything. It's like the leisure class — they have bourgeois freedom certain. Sartre and Beauvoir would say this is fake freedom — it's bad faith freedom. Because you can't, as a human being, an authentic human being, say, “Look, I'm free and that's because other people aren't. I'm the master, they're the servant.” You can't will that kind of freedom authentically, you have to will everyone's freedom at once.

And Beauvoir says, look, everyone's project — if you want to be a novelist or if you want to be anything in life, depends on everybody else in society. Because when society became complex, every single human being depends on every single other human being, basically, in society. So everyone has to have the same kind of freedom. It doesn't make sense for some people to have freedom and some people not to have freedom in a society. So everyone is embedded together and you have to sort of ask society's permission, whether you want to or not, to pursue your project. If you want to be a novelist, no matter what kind of society you live in, you have to ask permission from society basically — unless there's some kind of class system and you're just born rich and you can do whatever you want. But again, that's not authentic.

So in a true communist society or socialist society that they're envisioning, everyone has to participate in all those choices. So, like, in order to be a novelist, other people have to agree

voluntarily to take care of your basic needs because they want to read your novels. They want to see what you can produce ahead of time — you have to get other people's permission. That has to be how it works in any advanced civilized society. But there's a question of is it voluntary? Do we ask these people's permission? Or is it coercive where you just have money and you demand and dominate the people? An authentic view of freedom has to be a communist vision of freedom because it has to be universalizable if you're a philosopher or if you're just an authentic human being that doesn't want to lie to themselves — that's the only solution.

Della Duncan: So, that might sound great in the abstract — but how would it play out in reality? What happens when the threat of starvation is removed and the incentives of capitalism are abolished?

Corey Mohler: There's a lot of bad faith right-wing attacks on what a communist or socialist or kind of almost utopian vision would be of the future where nobody has to be forced to work. A lot of people think, “Oh, socialists are just lazy — they want everything handed to them.” And when we talk about positive freedom, say the freedom to not starve, and you say, you'll hear socialists or anarchists sometimes say, “Well, all our basic needs will be taken care of,” right? “So we'll be free to pursue our own desires.”

And that's a pretty loaded phrase. All our basic needs will be taken care of because they will be taken care of by other people doing work, right? People can talk about automation all they want, and it's like, that's great — there's a great dream that everything will be automated, but that's a hundred years away. In the meantime, people have to do work to make civilization run. And when you say, “All my basic needs are going to be taken care of, so I'll be free to do whatever I want,” you're not talking about socialist freedom — you're talking about bourgeois freedom. And if that's your opinion, you can just gamble on crypto and try to strike it rich and become in the leisure class. And you're not anyone's comrade, because if you're not willing to work to take care of other people's basic needs and you want your basic needs taken care of, you're not really participating in a communist society.

So, there has to be work done — no one denies this. It's a lot less work, by the way, because a lot of the work under capitalism is irrelevant. The number of hours we have to work is probably, like, 20 hours a week in America and everything would be fine. But there's obviously going to be a real serious question of who's going to do the work that people don't want to do, right? And conservatives will say this — like, they're basically admitting when they say this that we need slaves, right? It's kind of a funny thing that they admit, they're like, “Well, nobody will want to be a sewer worker.” So their solution is to force people to do it or starve. And you're like, well, this can't be the solution.

And there's, you know, there's pretty obvious solutions. What's funny about the worst jobs in America is that they're the jobs that pay the least. Like the less you get paid, the shittier that job is. It's totally backwards. So if you're in a free, voluntary society where people are making free, voluntary contracts with each other, the solution is easy — and this is how people organize all the time — I like to talk about like a desert island, right? If you have fifty people to crash on a desert island, the natural state of being is a voluntary society. Everyone will voluntarily take different jobs and coordinate with each other freely. There's not going to be a situation where you crash on the island and one person says, “Hey, I own half the island, all of you have to work for me or starve.” That's an absurd situation — everyone would reject it out of hand.

So say there's a situation where people crash on a desert island and there's one job that really sucks, like building houses when it's cold outside or something, and nobody wants to do that job. It's not going to be like a mystery, it's not just going to never happen. If society needs that job, it will happen. The other people in society are going to have to give something up and one person is going to have to do it — either through greater honors or maybe they get added benefits.

So, yes, there are bad jobs that will have to be done under communism. Maybe those people will get paid more, you know, if money still exists. If money doesn't exist, they get some other kind of benefit. It's actually a really easy problem to solve, and it's a problem that every society has always solved. So, yes, work still has to be done. Yes, there are terrible crappy jobs that probably still have to be done — people will do them. And guess what? Those people will receive the highest honors in society, they will be paid more, and they'll be more valued. It will be the complete opposite of what it is today and it will be a far better system. So I don't think it's a very serious problem.

Matt Christman: Well, I mean, if you assume that you do have a post-capitalist social order in which basic needs and comfort and security are the fruits of being part of society — as opposed to the situation we have now where you are on your own and total immiseration is not just possible, it's in your face every day as what will happen to you if you fuck up, the instinct has to be total self-fixation, worrying about yourself and your family and getting as much money and as much distance from precarity as possible, no matter what it takes — if that wolf isn't at your door, then labor becomes much less alienating.

But, you know, some jobs are still objectively unpleasant and objectively less stimulating and more, you know, arduous than others. And I think that the solution there is, honestly, relatively simple — since we're talking about a society where needs are met, then payment is not going to be a question of money, it's going to be a question of what money is supposed to represent — the real thing: time.

And so we imagine, like, who's going to be a garbage man, who's going to be a ditch digger, imagining, you know, a 40-hour workweek, that is the assumed minimal capital so that your time is spoken for in a wage relationship. Like, that's why even though we have the productivity for, you know, a generalized, like, 12-hour workweek, like Keynes predicted we would, we have not moved anywhere near that because it would undermine control, it would give people too much time on their hands.

So, the worst jobs can be done by people who only have to work a couple of hours a week — at that, at the unpleasant job. And if the rest of your time is yours and not in like the isolated, good luck going on the computer and finding a reason not to kill yourself way it is now, but, you know, where your time is yours as part of a community that is able to make life into the artwork that it should be, then I don't think anybody is going to fucking care if a couple of hours a week they got to, you know, muck out a stall.

And, of course, a lot of the most repetitive work would be doable by the incredible technological progress that we have made, like, we have made all of the technological leaps necessary to create, like, a post-scarcity world, I believe, but they are diffused and put to work to make profit. And so they can never be the liberating forces that people want them to be — no matter what the Silicon Valley fantasies are. But if taken over and their algorithms replaced — like the T-800 in T-2 — their programming replaced from *extract profit*, *pile up profit*, to distribute, you know,

rationally through this human organism, then the questions of labor really become much easier to handle. And the basic antagonism between the individual and like the social needs for labor inputs that has defined class society, I don't think would exist.

The things that people think of as eternal and immutable facts of human nature — there are things that the reality of being a human and living with humans, the reality of language and communication, I do think there are some things that over time become relatively immutable. But a lot of the things that we think of as immutable are very much relatively late products of a mode of production that is in its terminal crisis.

Corey Mohler: A lot of communist societies talk about a post-money society, and I genuinely believe it's not even difficult to imagine a society where simply honor — the greatest honors— are given to people who do shittier jobs. Like, people like being praised, you know? And people have shown throughout history will do shitty work if everyone honors them. And it's like, I don't think this is going to be a problem and people are doing it now for very little money — it's happening now.

There's not going to be a society where we just let the sewers crumble because everyone's too lazy to do it. In fact, if that were a society, you will find people will be eager to do it because they'll be seen as like the hero who saved — they went down and did it. I'd say, a really good example is in Japan, when the nuclear reactor melted down, people volunteered to go die. Was it the market economy that did this? No, they did it for honor because they knew they needed to save the reactor and go in there.

And you will always find people in every society who will volunteer to do that. Always. It will never be a situation where there's like something that needs to save society and nobody will volunteer to do the job. It's just not part of — you talk about human nature? I think that's part of human nature. Humans are a social being and they want to — they understand, first of all, they understand universalized concepts like that, iIf 100,000 people need something done and you need to sacrifice to do it, it's sort of your duty to do that. I think most human beings understand that and are willing to do that.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie — Short Song 011823]

Ayesha Khan: I think the greatest model of reciprocity, compassion and generosity is nature. We're part of it, but we've been severed and separated from it. But the land and how it gives and how it sustains many types of life forms and the cycles of, like, nature’s sacred cycles that actually allow life to continue — that is the greatest model that we can ever have because we have to integrate ourselves back into that.

And in terms of how humans have integrated themselves into that? There's models everywhere. I think today, before, and there will always be — there's always communities that are doing a better job of stewarding the lands and oceans that they're on and not seeing themselves as top of the — of a hierarchy, but of seeing themselves as a part of a web of relationships with equals, where every living organism, even if it's a single-celled bacteria, is equal to us. I need all of the bacteria that are living in my gut, on my skin, in and around me in order to survive. And I would die without them. But they also call me home. They also feed on me and sustain off of me. And that's essentially the type of sustainability that we need to actually think about.

And many people are — many societies have already done that. I think I've drawn more inspiration from even looking outside of the bounds of human societies because there are many societies in terms of non-human life forms that model inter- and intra- species collaboration, cooperation, mutualism, commensalism in terms of how they work together to share resources. And I think nature is sort of the best model of anarchy where there isn't an external force commanding people, commanding any other life form. There is no boss, there is no ruler or dictator or government. Things just are. Trees just have underground networks of roots that allow them to share resources. Bacteria just do live on the roots of trees to be able to provide for them while living off of them. That's just how nature works.

Ayesha Khan: Our liberation is tied to us seeing ourselves as equaled to every other non-human life form. Our liberation is tied to ourselves seeing us as not as saviors of anybody else, including the land — we're not saving the planet. The planet has its own agency. The planet has been fighting back. The planet has been resisting capitalism. And that's why we're still here. We would not be here if the Earth wasn't doing what the Earth does. And I think sort of toppling, even flipping the script on our heads to think of ourselves as we're just part of the big picture and we can just do our part. But reciprocity and justice and freedom is already being embodied all around us if we look closer.

David Bollier: If we're going to talk going upstream, to the root, I think we need to see that our human connections as biological creatures are more profound and interconnected and interdependent than we care to realize or bring to the surface. You know, human beings are simply a large, complex organism based on myriad interdependencies of symbiotic relationships.

So, once you start to get in sync with life as a relational phenomena, you get out of this capitalist mindset of essentialist character, of separate individual entities that have no connection to each other. You start to transverse to a different universe, a different worldview that I think is more congruent with historic, ancient realities of life itself. It cuts that deep. So let's go upstream, Let's talk about life. Let's talk about Indigenous peoples and their creative struggles through time to find living, fruitful, flourishing relationships with the earth. I mean, that's the kind of quest we need to do to go upstream and rediscover the realities — as well as, I think, build a new home for ourselves.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie — Short Song 011523]

Corey Mohler: Internally, what's going on in our brain is reflected into society, right? Even to extreme points, like, why does Bill Gates own Microsoft, right? The only reason he owns it is because everybody believes he owns it. There's actually nothing — there’s nothing there. Capitalists work ultimately on our minds, right? The only reason we go to work and obey our boss is because we believe he's the owner of the factory. Ultimately, I mean, it's kind of a banal point, but it's also, like, ultimately, ideology governs everything. So the real upstream route is our ideas. How to make a change, of course, in people's ideas and to know you're making the change for the best — you don't want to be a dictator yourself — is an enormously difficult problem that I can't solve. I have no idea how to do it. But if we could get a more voluntary cultural production and ideological production system, I think that would be necessary to create a just society.

Corey Mohler: There is a thought experiment where there's like, say there's like a monarchy, right? The king owns the entire thing. Everybody believes he's the king. And then an evil witch comes and does a spell where everybody falls asleep and then everybody wakes up the next day and they forgot that he was the king. How would he go about convincing them that he was the king again? And the answer would be — it would be totally, absolutely impossible, because it's an absurd — there's no justification. There's absolutely no justification for somebody being a king. So the evil witch comes, they all forget, everybody wakes up the next day, the monarchy is over. Now they have a democracy.

The same thing could be true of capitalism. If an evil witch came in America and made all Americans go to sleep and we woke up the next day and nobody owned any property, we would not invent property again. We would not all go to work and say, “Oh, you're the boss, you own the factory, I'm the worker” — nobody would come up with it. It's all already in our brains — all it has to do is get extracted, right? Like if an evil witch erased capitalism and we all woke up tomorrow, all the natural mode of being would be voluntary cooperation. Nobody would believe Jeff Bezos was the owner of Amazon. Nobody would believe it. He would, maybe he's the only one that didn't go to sleep and he says, look, I own — I'm a billionaire. I own everything. All of you have to go work in my factories. and you’d go, “Fuck off — we're not going to work in your factory. We don't know who you are. You're the same as us.” So unfortunately, there's no witches, and you have to do it very slowly. But forgetting property relations is kind of interesting thought experiment.

Ayesha Khan: I guess if someone told me capitalism was the freest system we'd ever had, I would just ask more questions to try to even understand where they're coming from probably — to understand what level of awareness they've had, how far they've really thought about it, or how much are they just sort of regurgitating, you know, the values of the empire that have been fed onto them.

And I think my response would even start by understanding their conditions and going from there in terms of asking them, telling them almost, that you deserve better, that you shouldn't have had to fight for crumbs**,** you shouldn't have had to compete with your peers, you should have had a loving, supportive community since the day you were born.–And in a world that we live in today that is hierarchical and deeply inequitable, we're all placed on a ladder.

And I think first acknowledging their humanity and acknowledging their dignity, because it seems like it's restricted to humans, but their dignity and saying they deserve better. That if they had food, water, shelter, wouldn't that be the precursor of — or the basic conditions that they need to even feel free? Why would fighting for something be the freest that they would have ever been? Why wouldn't they be able to truly figure out who they are, what they love doing, what makes them happy, what gives them joy, what is the best way that they can actually serve their community? Wouldn't they even just be able to figure that out if they had infinite options that they could explore without the threat of violence or coercion or food hanging over their head? To me, that sounds like freedom.

So I think I would just ask questions to even get them to see that the things that they've been told so far might just not be it. And I really do believe that there's so many variables that go into why someone gets radicalized, like, politically radicalized. A lot of it is the stuff that they face. So I feel like a lot of communities that are facing the material reality of being marginalized and oppressed might even think capitalism is the thing that frees them — similarly to how I know

many community members back home who, like have all sorts of internalized colonialism and aspire to just being white and any way possible. And it comes from generations and generations of torture, abuse and oppression — and they don't know any other world. And I think the only way people can see differently is if they receive the love and care that they've always deserved. So I think starting there is — with some compassion — is probably the first way to even get people to see that they've never been free, but they deserve that.

[Upstream theme music]

Robert Raymond: Thank you to all of our guests, to Collections of Colonies of Bees, Peder, Mammoth Star, Do Make Say Think, and Chris Zabriskie for the music in this episode, and to Bethan Mure for the cover art. Upstream theme music was composed by me, Robbie.

You might have noticed that we've only released one documentary so far this year. Unfortunately, we got some bad news at the beginning of this year regarding our funding — a foundation that had been supporting us stopped funding organizations based in the United States and so we lost a significant chunk of our income — income which really allowed us to do these documentaries. Each documentary we produce takes weeks of research, script writing and rewriting, several interviews, hours of editing, mixing and sound design — the labor time associated with them is huge and so without that kind of foundation support we can't justify doing four per year. We're hoping this will change and that we'll be able to raise enough money this year to move back to the quarterly cycle next year, but it's not certain in any way that we'll be able to do that.

It's also possible that we could raise enough individual donations from listeners to be able to support the more in-depth, labor-intensive content, and that's definitely where you can come in to help, if you're able. Making even a small monthly donation makes a huge difference in allowing us to keep this content free and sustainable and in allowing us to make more of these kinds of documentaries in addition to our In Conversation series. If you can, if you're at a place where you can afford to do so and if it's important for you to keep this content free and sustainable, please consider going to upstreampodcast.org/support to make a one-time or recurring monthly donation. And because we're fiscally sponsored by the nonprofit Independent Arts and Media, all donations within the U.S. are tax-exempt.

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