

The following is a conversation with Bhaskar Sankara. He's a Democratic socialist, a political writer, founding editor of Jacobin, president of the nation, former vice chair of the Democratic Socialist of America, and the author of *The Socialist Manifesto*, *The Case for Radical Politics* and *An Era of Extreme Inequality*. As a side note, let me say that this conversation with Bhaskar Sankara, who's a brilliant socialist writer and philosopher, represents what I hope to do with this podcast. I hope to talk to the left and the right, to the far left and the far right, always with the goal of presenting and understanding both the strongest interpretation of their ideas and valuable thought-provoking arguments against those ideas. Also, I hope to understand the human being behind the ideas. I trust in your intelligence as the listener to use the ideas you hear to help you learn, to think, to empathize, and to make up your own mind. I will often fall short in pushing back too hard or not pushing back enough or not bringing up topics I should have, of talking too much, of interrupting too much, or maybe sometimes in the rare case is not enough, of being too silly on a serious topic or being too serious on a silly topic. I'm trying to do my best and I will keep working my ass off to improve. In this way, I hope to talk to prominent figures in the political space, even controversial ones, on both the left and the right. For example, I hope to talk to Donald Trump and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to Ron DeSantis and Barack Obama, and of course many others across the political spectrum. I sometimes hear accusations about me being controlled in some way by a government or an intelligence agency like CIA, FSB, Mossad, or perhaps that I'm controlled in some way by the very human desire for money, fame, power, access. All I have is my silly little words, but let me give them to you. I'm not and will never be controlled by anyone. There's nothing in this world that can break me and force me to sacrifice my integrity. People call me naive. I'm not naive. I'm optimistic. And optimism isn't a passive state of being. It's a constant battle against the world that wants to pull you into a downward spiral of cynicism. To me, optimism is freedom. Freedom to think, to act, to build, to help. At times, in the face of impossible odds. As I often do, please allow me to read a few lines from the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling. If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you. If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too. If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, or being lied about on dealing lies, or being hated, don't give way to hating, and yet don't look too good or talk too wise. Even this very poem is mocking my overromantic ridiculousness as I read it. The meta irony is not lost on me, my friends. I'm a silly little kid trying to do a bit of good in this world. Thank you for having my back through all of it. All of my mistakes. Thank you for the love. And now, a quick few second mention of each sponsor. Check them out in the description. It's the best way to support this podcast. We got House of Academies for Snacks, Linode for Linux Systems, On It for Supplements, Insight Tracker for Biomonitoring, and ExpressVPN for Security and Privacy. Choose wise, my friends. And now, onto the full ad reads. Never any ads in the middle. I hate those. I try to make this interesting, but if you skip them, please still check out our sponsors. I enjoy their stuff. Maybe you will too. This show is brought to you by a relatively new and absolutely, it's not even relative, it's absolutely objectively delicious sponsor, House of Academies. It's a company that ships delicious, high quality, and healthy macadamia nuts directly to your door and all kinds of snacks based on macadamia nuts. The first shipment they sent me was just a source of a lot of happiness for me.

I was going through some tough times in my life, but recently there's been a lot of ups and downs. It's been a wild ride. It's been a wild ride. And there's something about sitting in that couch I have, which I got so I can feel like an adult and contemplating the ups and downs of life and just letting my mind become still, empty it of thought, and then just slowly with a stupid smile on my face, consume macadamia snacks. There's a lot of sexual innuendos I can do here, by the

way. If you doubt my ability to do sexual innuendos, how dare you? But I'm going to keep it respectful

and say that it's 30% less carbs than almonds. Man, I don't even know. I think I've been always criticized in my life. One of the harshest criticisms throughout my life is I don't know how to pronounce almonds. Is it almonds? Almonds. Almonds. Almonds. Almonds. It's almonds, right?

Yeah. It's almonds. Anyway, what matters is the snacks are delicious. And actually as a sponsor, they're awesome. They're with us for the long haul and they've just been so kind and respectful, big fans, and I'm just a big fan of theirs. So anything you could do to support them, I would love it. It just means a lot to me when there's great companies doing great stuff and just being great people. I mean, forget all the products and all that. I love it. So support them. They're really good people. Anyway, speaking of really good people and a really good company that you should definitely support is Linode. And this episode is brought to you by it. It's Linux Virtual Machines. I use it a lot. It's an awesome computer infrastructure that lets you develop, deploy, and scale with applications you build faster and easier. There's nothing better than Linux. And here, you don't have to have Linux in your machine. You can have it in the cloud, and you can have it not just a little baby machine, you can scale, you can launch a giant machine, you can launch many machines. By the way, they do have really good customer service 24, 7, 365. But that's not what matters. What matters is Linux is awesome. Did I say that? Linus Torvald is definitely somebody he needs to talk to. Somebody posted on Reddit. Why have you not talked to Linus Torvald yet? And it's a good question. I'm not sure I know exactly how to reach him, which sounds kind of funny. And I think he's not, he's a difficult person to get to to do a long form interview. I think his source of happiness is in doing the work in serving the Linux community, just doing the low level kernel development and managing the community and all that. I don't know how much he enjoys conversation or educating or inspiring others about the work going on in Linux. I think it's really important because I think the world, I mean, so many important things in the world run on Linux. And I don't know why we don't always celebrate that. And I mean, it's one of the things I really love doing with this podcast is just celebrating amazing people. I using technology or using whatever skill they have to try to build a better world. And I think that's what Linus is doing. That's what people working on Linux all all through the stacks, whether it's the different distributions, the different packages and all that kind of stuff. There's the open source movement in general. It's just beautiful to see all the stuff you see on GitHub. It warms my heart to see all these brilliant engineers just building stuff, small stuff and big stuff. And many of it helps make the world a better place. It really, I believe in honesty does. Anyway, visit linode.com slash Lex for free credit. This episode is brought to you by on it a nutrition supplement and fitness company. They make alpha brain and utropic that helps support memory mental speed and focus. I sometimes take alpha brain if I know I have a very difficult

design or programming task at hand, it's going to take several hours of just focused work. And I'm not quite feeling it. So if I know there's a deep work session that's going to involve some mental blocks, mental struggle, where it's going to be dead ends and so on, I'll take it off a brain to help me out. I've recently been trying to adjust ways in which I slice my day. I really do find that I'm exceptionally productive and mentally sharp and focused in the morning for several hours. So two, three, four, five, six, seven hours in the morning. As long as it's uninterrupted, as long as I don't talk or see other human beings or sees okay, see and smile, you know, like the warmth of humanity is great. But there's something about talking that really drains me, especially in the morning. And then in the evening, the same, I just am exceptionally productive and can really focus for long periods of time. It's that afternoon time that I think is best for more like exercise and naps and more relaxing or like tasks that don't require much brain power. Anyway, it's kind of funny how each of us probably have our own little optimization problem that we're trying to solve about what makes us feel good, what enables us to interact with other human beings in our lives that we love and make them feel good and just be a productive member of society, you know, reach for the stars, be the best version of yourself, but also just enjoy it. I mean, it's a weird optimization problem that involves nutrition, that involves exercise. And I think in part, at least at some point in your life, it involves a kind of strict analysis of your schedule of how you spend the minutes in your day. And then I think part of that process is to then let it go. Similar with diet, you can have a strict diet. Once you understand the nature of calories and nutrition and vitamins and so on that you can let go of that and have an instinctual understanding of food and then you can start to really enjoy food. Anyway, you can get a special discount on AlphaBrain at lexfreedman.com slash on it. This show is also brought to you by InsideTracker, a service I use to track biological data that comes from my body and gives me suggestions about what I should do in my life. Now, those suggestions are basic lifestyle decisions and diet decisions, but I can't wait until we have something like brain-computer interface that enables you to make like career decisions, dating decisions, all kinds of decisions. Of course, not forced. I'm just giving you like a clippy that pops up and says, have you considered these red flags about this person that you're talking to? Or, hey, that interesting person deserves another look? I don't know. I'm joking, of course, because I think that level of recommendation is difficult to achieve. But the point is there's so much data coming from your human body that I think medicine and just in general recommendation should be based at least in part on that data versus looking at generic population data about what's good for you in terms of diet and exercise and sleep and all that kind of stuff. I think this is the future and InsideTracker is taking steps towards that future. Get special savings for a limited time and you go to insidetracker.com slash flex. Finally, this show is also brought to you by ExpressVPN. I've used them for many, many, many years. The big sexy red button that you click and it just works and it protects your privacy on this big, beautiful, complex internet of hours that's full of chaos and dangers and so on. A good VPN should be your first layer of protection. And it does a bunch of other things, of course, but I think the most important thing is it just works and it works fast. It works on any device, any operating system, works on Linux, anything. Android is very intuitive to use. It does one thing and it does it extremely well and that's what I think great pieces of software, great services should do. Do one thing and do it extremely well.

Well, to me, ExpressVPN for many years has been the embodiment of that idea. Go to expressvpn.com slash lexpod for an extra three months free. This is the Lex Friedman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Bhaskar Sankara. Let's start with a big, broad question. What is socialism? How do you like to define it? How do you like to think about it? Well, there's so many socialists out there and we can't seem to agree about anything. So my definition, I'm sure, is really just my definition. But I think at the minimum, socialism is about making sure that the core necessities of life, food, housing, education and so on are guaranteed to everyone just by virtue of being born so that those people can reach their potential. And I think that's a minimum requirement of socialism. Beyond that, I think socialism, especially democratic socialism, the type of socialism that I believe in, is about taking democracy from just the political democratic realm and extending it into economic and social spheres as well. So if we think that democracy is a good thing, why do we allow our workplaces to be run in autocratic ways? So economic, political, social, in all those realms, the ideas, the philosophical ideas apply. What are, if you can put words to it, what are some philosophical ideas about human beings that are at the core of this? I think at the core, it's the idea that we have intrinsic value. We are individuals that have unequal talents, of course, we're individuals that want different things. But this unique individualness can only truly come to light in a society in which there are certain collective or social guarantees. So we could think, just like Stephen J. Gould, the scientists and socialists used to say, about how many thousands of potential Einstein's or Leonardo da Vinci's that died in sweatshops and on plantations and never got the chance to cultivate what was unique and human about themselves and also never got a chance to have families and impart what was special and important to them to future generations and to posterity. My own grandmother was born in Trinidad and Tobago. She was illiterate till her dying days in East Orange, New Jersey. She never had the chance to write down her memories of her life in Trinidad as a young woman and what it meant. She, of course, had lots of children and she was able to impart some stories to her children and grandchildren. But I often think about what someone with her wit and intelligence could have done with a little bit more support. But if all human beings have intrinsic value, you don't have to be an Einstein for the application of some of the ideas that you're talking about. Is there a tension or a trade-off between our human civilization, our society, helping the unlucky versus rewarding the skillful and the hardworking? I think you could do both. There's always a balance between the two. I think you could reward people who make innovations and who improve lives for everyone through their innovations by giving them, let's say, even more consumption. Even that level of inequality while still making sure that there's not people in poverty and suffering and while making sure that, hey, we're going to give these people who want to work that extra 10 hours or 20 hours or want to apply their hard work some extra benefits, but that these benefits would be not the extreme disparities that you have today. So at the core of socialism and maybe democratic socialism, is that maybe a reallocation of wealth, reallocation of resources? I think it's wealth and resources, yes, but it's also power. And I guess one way to think about this is some thinkers on the right, like Hayek, they would say in their most generous moments talking about socialists and socialism, they would say, socialist want to trade some of your freedom

for equality. And that's them trying to just accurately describe what socialism is trying to do. The way that I would put it, it's a little bit different. Socialists are proposing a tradeoff, but it's really a tradeoff between freedom and freedom. And by that, I mean, let's say you set up a successful business and you set up a business right here in Austin, Texas, some sort of firm, it's producing some widget or whatever and it's producing a good that people really want and demand. But you have some competition, you decide to hire 20, 30 people to help you. You entered into a free contract with these people who under capitalism, of course, we're not living in feudalism, have the option to join any other firm, but they like you and they like this firm and they like your offer and you're paying them, let's say \$20 an hour for 40 hours of work per week. Now, if the government comes along and says, okay, there's now a new minimum wage, minimum wage is \$22 an hour. And also there's a maximum work week, 35 hour work week. And if you work someone over 35 hours, even if they agree, you have to pay them time and a half. Now, that, of course, is now an abridgment of your freedom as an entrepreneur, your freedom to set certain terms of employment, to engage in a contract with free people. But now your workers and other workers in the sector, because if you did it unilaterally, you just get undercut by your competition. Now, these people now have a few extra hours a week, they can do whatever they want with, they could watch more NFL with it, they could spend more time with their friends or family or whatever else. And they're still getting paid the same, if not better, because the wages also went up. So, it's really a question often of tradeoffs between who's freedom and autonomy, are you going to prioritize the freedom and autonomy of the entrepreneur or the capitalist in this case, or the freedom and autonomy of ordinary workers. Now, you could create a society that swings so far in the direction of prioritizing the freedom of one group or one class or whatever else, compared to another, that you end up in some sort of tyranny. Now, if the state said, you know, you Lex, you're a capitalist, so you don't get the right to vote, or we're going to take away your private home or your ability to do things we think are intrinsic human rights. Now, this would be tyranny, this would be an abridgement of your rights, but shaping your ability in the economic sphere to be an economic actor is, I think, within the realm and scope of democratic politics. Yeah, so those are the extremes you're referring to. And one perspective I like to take on socialism versus capitalism is under each system, the extremes of each systems and the moderate versions of each system. How can people take advantage of it? So it seems like no matter what part of human nature is, whatever the rules, whatever the framework, whatever the system, somebody's going to take advantage of it. And that's the kind of pragmatic look at it, in practice, what actually happens. Also, the incentives and the human behavior, what actually happens in practice under these systems. So if you have a higher and higher minimum wage, and people watch more and more NFL, how does that change their actual behavior as a productive member of society? And actually at the individual level, as somebody who could be an Einstein, and chooses not to, because NFL is so awesome to watch. So like, is both how do people, malicious people that want to take advantage? Maybe not malicious, but people that, like me, are lazy and want to take advantage. And people that also I think like me, like I tend to believe about myself that I have potential. And if I let my laziness naturally take over, which it often does, I won't materialize the potential. So if you make life too easy for me, I feel like I

will never get anything done. Me personally, of course, there's a giant set of circumstances of the unlucky and the overburden and so on. Okay. So how can people take advantage of each system, socialism, capitalism? So for one thing, people are going to take advantage of systems, they're going to find loopholes, they're going to find ways around, they're going to find ways to, to at times, dominate and coerce others, even in systems meant to get rid of domination and coercion. That's why we need to design our systems in such a way that, that it eliminates as many of these things as possible. And also that's why we need democracy, we need freedom. So in a Soviet system, for instance, you had the rise of this authoritarian bureaucracy that dominated, of course, others in the name of socialism. Now, that system desperately could have used some political democracy and some checks on what people were doing and some ability to reverse their power, right? And as soon as, of course, little elements of democracy was brought to that system, the system, you know, collapsed because there started to be outlets for, for dissent and for dissatisfaction. So I think we can't design a priori, a perfect system. We need to be committed to certain principles that allow systems to be perfected. And for me, that's the importance of democracy. So even a few years ago, not to go on a tangent, but people were lauding Chinese authoritarianism and they're saying, China is building this efficient system, the state runs so well, there's technocratic excellence, plus there's just productivity and they're just working harder than Americans and whatever else. But look at in practice what really happened with COVID, both the initial suppressing of information about what was happening in Wuhan and the outbreak where many ordinary Chinese workers and doctors and others were trying to get the word out and they were suppressed by Communist Party officials locally in Wuhan, probably with the collusion naturally, nationally. And now with zero COVID policies and whatever else. So I think that often we find that even though it seems like these are weak systems and democracy makes us less competent technocratically and otherwise, I think it's kind of a necessity for systems to grow and evolve to have that freedom in civil society. But as for individuals, now, the first part of it is, yeah, I think people should be free to make their own choices. You might have tremendous potential, but you might choose to spend it in leisure and leisure doesn't only mean doing, you know, sitting around at home, drink a bunch of berries, kind of wasting your life away that way. Leisure might mean spending more time with their friends and family, building these sort of relationships that are gonna maybe not change the world and some medicines, but we'll change the lives of the people around you and we'll change your community for the better. I'm taking notes here because I, for me, leisure just meant playing a lot of Skyrim. This whole family relationship that I'm gonna have to work on that. I didn't realize that's also including leisure because I'm gonna have to reconsider my whole life here. Anyway, leisure should mean civic activity too, right? I mean, there's that famous book, The Robert Putnam One, Bowling Alone or whatever, which described it for now. I mean, I was born in 1989. I like video and computer games, you know. So I definitely do that type of leisure too, but I found a lot more richness in my life when in the last decade, a lot of my leisure has returned to like going to the local bar for like the couple drinks I have a week instead of doing it at home alone, watching TV or something, you know, because you get that random conversation, that sense of a place and belonging. But I guess what's the undercurrent maybe of your question was, now, if you have a system with lots of carrots, but not the whip of, hey,

you might be destitute, you might be unemployed, you might not be able to support yourself unless you're working a certain amount, would we still be as productive? Would we still be able to generate enough value for society? And I think that that's a question that is quite interesting. I think that we're living in a society now with enough abundance that we could afford more people deciding to opt out of the system, out of production, and that the carrots of staying in, you know, more money for consumption, more ability to do cool things, more just social rewards that comes from being successful or from providing, would be enough. But that's another thing that would have to be balanced in a system. So if we're seeing mass unemployment by choice in a democratic socialist system, then you might need to reconfigure the incentives. You might need to encourage people to go back into production. But that's something that, again, you could do through democracy and through good governance. You don't have to set the perfect blueprint in motion, you know, write up a treatise now and 50 years from now, you know, try to follow it like it's Scripture. So by the way, I do like how you said whip instead of stick in carrot and stick. That's putting a weight on the scale of which is better. But yes, but I would actually argue to push back that the wealthier we get as a society, as a world, that the more comfortable the socialness become, the less of a whip or stick they become. Because one of the negative consequences, even if you're on welfare is like, well, life is not going to be that great. But the wealthier we become, the better the social programs become, the easier life becomes at the bottom. And so you might not have this motivation financially to get out from the bottom. That said, the pushback and the pushback

is that there's something about human nature in general, money aside, that strives for greatness, that strives to provide a great life, a great middle class life for your family. So that's the motivated to get off from the bottom. Well, I think a lot of people who are stuck at the bottom of the labor market today, one, these are people who are kind of our true philanthropists, because a lot of them are the ones who are working two jobs and are working 60 plus hours and are providing

in this country, it's such a bargain for their labor because they're so underpaid.

So many of the things that the rest of us use to enjoy life and consumption or whatever else.

Like, I got here from downtown Austin, and I think my lift, I did tip, but I think my lift was like eight bucks space or whatever else. I think that we are all indebted to people who are working and we don't see it at various stages of the production process from the workers in China and Taiwan producing technological things that we're recording this on to growers and workers and agriculture in the US. So I think that one working class people are already working, but as far as getting out from under poverty and desperation, we're in a society that doesn't give people a lot of tools. So if you don't have access to good public schools from age five until 12, 13, it's going to be really hard to move from generations of your family being involved in manual labor to doing other forms of labor. You're going to be stuck at a certain part of our labor market as a result. If you don't have access to decent health care throughout your life, you might be already preordained to an early grave by the time that something kicks in, you really want to change something in your life in your mid-20s. Obviously, it's a combination of agency and all these other factors. There's still something, I think, innately human, innately striving that a lot of people have, but we don't really give people in our current society the tools to really be full participants in our society. We just take for granted, for example, and I'm from the Northeast, so I give like excessively Northeast examples. We take for

granted that someone from Hartford, Connecticut is going to have your average working class person,

Hartford, is going to have a very different life outcome than someone born on the same day, the same hour in Greenwich, Connecticut. We take for granted that accidents of birth are going to dictate outcomes. So you mean like depending on the conditions of where you grow up, there's going to be fundamentally different experience in terms of education, in terms of the resources available to you to allow yourself to flourish?

Yes, of course, city and a rich city, and Connecticut is great. It's highly, highly underrated. Both New Yorkers and people from Boston kind of have a colonial feeling about Connecticut where we make fun of it and we try to carve it up. The West belongs to New York, the East to Boston, but I'm here for Connecticut nationalism. I think it's a great place.

Okay. Can we actually step back a little bit on definitions because you said that some of the ideas practically that you're playing with is democratic socialism.

We talked about the higher level, the higher kind of vision of socialism, the ideas, the philosophical ideas, but how does it all fit into the big picture historically of ideas of Marxism, communism, and socialism as it was defined and experienced and implemented in the 20th century? So what's your key differences? Maybe even just like socialism, communism.

Yeah. Well, I hate the no-true-Scotsman sort of response to this, which is, oh, that socialism is bad. So it wasn't really socialism, and my socialism is good, so it is socialism. But I think that socialism and communism share a common ancestor, which is they both emerged out of the turmoil and development of late 19th century capitalism and the fact that there was all these workers' parties that were organizing across the capitalist world.

So in Europe, for instance, you had this mass party called the German Social Democratic Party, and that became probably the most important, the most vibrant party in Germany in the 1880s and 1890s. But they were locked out of power because Germany at the time was still mostly a target. It had a parliamentary democracy, but it was a very undemocratic democracy.

The Kaiser is still ruled. These movements took root across the capitalist world, but including in Russia and in conditions of illegality. So it was assumed for many, many years, and the workers' movement across Europe and among socialists of Europe, they called themselves social democrats then, that the revolution would first probably happen in Germany in this developed, growing hub of industrial capitalism and not in semi-feudal Russia. But then World War I came, the workers' movement was split between parties that decided to either keep their head down or to implicitly support the war, and then support the war for now or keep their heads down, don't get banned, don't get arrested, and then we'll just take power after the war is over. And those like Russia, and also in the United States for that matter, that chose the path of resistance to the war. And it was the Bolshevik faction of the Russian movement, Lenin's Bolshevik party that took power in Russia after a period of turmoil where it didn't seem, well, was it going to go to the fascist right or was it going to go to the far left? There was a period of flux and turmoil in Russia, but definitely the old regime was not able to stand. And these Russian social democrats, these Bolsheviks said, social democracy has so betrayed the idea of internationalism and brotherhood and progress it was supposed to stand for that we can't call ourselves social democrats anymore.

We're going to go back to this old term that Marx used, we're going to call ourselves communists. And that's where official kind of communism out of Russia emerged. In other parts of Europe,

parties were actually able to take power, some in the interwar period, but most in the post-war period. And they also came out of this old social democratic movement. And these parties mostly just call themselves socialists. And a lot of them still on paper wanted to go beyond capitalism. But in practice, they just managed capitalism better in the interests of workers. But they all had the same common ancestor. And in practice, to me, social democracy means trying to insert doses of socialism within capitalism, of maintaining capitalism.

Communism met this attempt to build a socialism outside of capitalism and often authoritarian ways, in part because of the ideology of these communists, but in part because of the conditions in which they inherited. They were inheriting a democracy. They were inhering a country that had been ruled by the Tsars for centuries. And with very little condition, like a very weak working class, very poor and devastated by war, and so on, where authoritarianism kind of lended itself to those conditions. And then there's me. Then there's democratic socialists. And the way I would define it is we like a lot of what the social democrats accomplished, but we still believe in going beyond capitalism and not just building socialism within capitalism, but we believe in this ultimate vision of a world after capitalism.

What does that world look like and how is it different from communism? Actually, maybe we can linger before we talk about your vision of democratic socialism. What was wrong with communism, Stalinism, implementation of communism in the Soviet Union? Why did it go wrong? And in what ways did it not go wrong? In what ways did it succeed?

Let me start with the second part of that question. And that's a very difficult one to answer in part because I morally and ethically am opposed to any form of authoritarianism or dictatorship. And often when you talk about the successes of a government or what it did developmentally that might have been positive, we have to abstract ourselves from what we morally believe and just just kind of look at the record, right? I would say that the Soviet experiment started off by in Lenin's time as the attempt to kind of just hold a holding action. Hey, we don't really have the conditions to rule this country. We have the support of the working class or most of it, but the working class is only 3% of the population. The peasantry is really against us. A lot of this 3% of the population has died in war and half of them supported the Mensheviks and the more moderate socialists anyway. But the alternative in their minds was going to be a far right reaction, you know, some sort of general taking power in a coup or whatever else, or just them ending up back in prison because a lot of them were in prison under Tsar or just killed. So they figured, all right, we're going to have a holding action where we maintain as much of this territory of their old Russian empire as possible. We'll try to slowly implement changes, re-stabilize the economy through something called a new economic program, which was kind of a form of social democracy, if you will, because it allowed market exchange for the peasants combined with state ownership of industries in the cities. And for a while, it seemed to be working. The revolution never came that they were expecting in Western Europe. But in Russia itself, they were able to re-stabilize things by the middle or end of the 1920s, and they were able to build more of a popular base for some of their policies because people who had

seen the chaos of World War I and Revolution and then Civil War kind of just wanted stability. And after a decade plus of war, if you had a government that was able to give you enough to eat and a job, you know, that was good enough for them, then Stalin came into power and he wanted to rapidly industrialize. And his logic was the revolution is not going to come in the

West. We need to build socialism in one country, and we need to catch up with the West. We need to turn ourselves into an industrial powerhouse as quickly as possible. And that's where you got forced collectivization to try to increase the productivity of Russian agriculture through state ownership of previously fragmented agricultural holdings and through the implementation of mechanization. So bringing in more machines to make agriculture more productive, all under state ownership, plus more ambitious attempts to build heavy industry through five year plans. Now, I say this kind of coolly, but we know in practice what that meant, you know, forced collectivization was a disaster. I mean, first of all, I think was built on the faulty premise that scale always equals more productivity when in fact, especially in agriculture, but in any field, it's a little bit more complicated than that. And it led to millions of deaths, you know, it led to famine, it led to a host of other problems. Industrialization in the way that had happened under Stalin also kind of unbalanced the Soviet economy to lean too heavy towards heavy industry, not enough for medium or light industry. But this did mean especially the five year plan industrialization did manage to put Russia on a different developmental trajectory. So by the time the post war period came, one, it might have gave them the ability to survive the Nazi invasion to begin with. That's a complicated question. And then by the time the post war period came, Russia had kind of jumped ahead of its developmental trajectory in a way that a lot of other countries didn't do. There are a few examples like Japan is one to manage to, if you kind of ran a scenario of where Japan would be in the 1870s, 1880s and ran it 100 times, the Japan of the post war period is kind of one of the best outcomes, right? And I think that that you could say that about Russian economic development, its ability to catch up at a certain level to the West. And then after that, of course, later on, as economies got more complex, as they kind of move beyond regular heavy industry and as the main stable of the economy, the Russian economy in its command system was unable to adapt and cope and ended up falling back behind the West again by the 1970s. So all this is a very long story to say that a lot went wrong. In Russia, the economic picture is actually a little bit more complicated. Politically, I think it's just a small party without much popular support, but with real popular support in a couple of cities, without a lot of popular support empire wide took power and they felt they couldn't give back power. And they kept holding on to power and eventually among their ranks in these conditions. One of history's great tyrants took power and was able to justify what he was doing in the context of the Russian nation and development, but also all the threats that came from abroad through, you know, the Civil War wasn't just a civil war, it was really an invasion by many imperial powers all around the world as well. So I think a lot of it was conditions and circumstance. And I guess the question really is to what role ideology played. Is there something within the socialist tradition that might have lend itself to authoritarianism? And that's something we should talk about. And that's a really complicated human question. It does seem that the rhetoric, the populism of workers unite, we've been fucked over for way too long. Let's stand together. Somehow that message allows flawed or evil people to take power. It seems like the rhetoric, the idea is so good, maybe the utopian nature of the idea is so good that it allows a great speaker to take power. It's almost like if the mission, like come with me friends, beyond the horizon, a great land is waiting for us, that encourages sort of, yeah,

dictators, authoritarians to take power. Is there something within the ideology that allows for that, for the sort of, for lying to people, essentially?

Well, I might surprise you with my answer because I would say yes, maybe. But I think that it's not just socialism. Any sort of ideology that appeals to the collective and appeals to our long-term destiny, either as a species or as a nation or as a class or whatever else, can lend itself to authoritarianism. So you can see this in many of the nationalisms of the 20th century. Now, some of these nationalisms use incredibly lofty collective rhetoric, like in Sweden, the rhetoric of we're going to create the people's home. We're going to make this a country with dignity for all Swedes. We're going to make this a country that's more developed, more free, and so on. And they managed to build a pretty excellent society in my estimation from that. In countries like fascist Germany and Italy, they managed to do horrendous things in Japan and horrendous things

with that. In the US with national popular appeals, FDR was able to unite a nation to elevate ordinary

working class people into a position where they felt like they had a real stake in the country, and I think did great things with the New Deal. In Russia, of course, this language was used to trample upon individual rights and to justify hardship and abuses of ordinary individual people in the name of a collective destiny. A destiny, of course, it was just decided by the party in power and during the 30s and 40s by just Stalin himself, really. Now, I think that that's really the case for making sure that we have a bedrock of civil rights and democracy. And then on top of that, we could debate. We could debate different national destinies. We could debate different appeals, different visions of the world, but as long as people have a say in what sacrifices they're being asked to do, and as long as those sacrifices don't take away what's fundamentally ours, which is our life, which is our basic rights. And voice, our voice. So this complicated picture, because, help me understand, you mentioned that social democracy is trying to have social policies within a capitalist system in part, but your vision, your hope for a social democracy is one that goes beyond that. How do you give everybody a voice while not becoming the Soviet Union, while not becoming where basically people are silenced either directly through violence or through the implied threat of violence and therefore fear?

So I think you need to limit the scope of where the state is and what the state can do and how the state functions, first of all. Now, for me, social democracy was like the equivalent of, I'll give a football analogy. It was the equivalent of getting to the red zone and then kicking a field goal. You'll take the three points, but you would have rather got a touchdown. And for me, socialism would be the touchdown. It's not a separate, different playing field.

Some people would say socialism would be an interception.

Sure. No, and they would have the right to, again, to say that and to say we shouldn't go further. And most coaches would take the safe route, right? So you're going against the decision. Anyway, I understand. So for you, the goal is full socialism.

But I'll take the three points. I just want to march down the field. I want to get within scoring position. The reason why we should really move from this analogy, but the reason why I call myself a socialist is looking through history and these examples of social democracy. You saw that they were able to give working class people lots of rights and income and power in their society. But at the end of the day, capitalists still have the ultimate power, which is the ability to withhold investment. So they could say in the late 1960s and the early 70s, listen,

I was fine with this arrangement 10 years ago. But now I feel like I'm going to, you know, take my money and I'm going to go move to a different country or I'm just going to not invest because my workers are paid too much. I'm still making money, but I feel like I could be making more. I need more of an upper hand, right? So their economic power is then challenging the democratic mandate of Swedish workers that were voting for the Social Democratic Party and were behind this advance. So to me, what socialism is in part is taking the means of production, right, where this capitalist power is coming from and making it socially owned so that ordinary workers can control their workplaces, can make investment decisions and so on. Now, does that mean total state ownership of everything or a planned economy? I don't think that makes any sense. You know, I think that we should live in a society in which markets are harnessed and regulated and so on. My main problem is capitalist ownership in part on normative grounds, just because I think that it doesn't make sense that we celebrate democracy and all these other spheres, but we have workplaces that are just treated like tyrannies. And in part because I think that ordinary workers would much prefer a system in which over time they accrued shares and ownership, where they got in addition to a base kind of wage, they got dividends from their firm being successful and that they figured out how to, you know, large firms, they're not going to be making day-to-day decisions by democratic vote, right? But maybe you would elect representatives, elected managements once every year or two, depending on your operating agreement and so on. That's kind of my vision of a socialist society. And this sounds, I hope, like agree or disagree, like it would not be a crazy leap into year zero, right? That this could be maybe a way in which we could take a lot of what's existing in society, but then just add this on top. But what it would mean is a society without a capitalist class. This class hasn't been, you know, individually, these people, you know, haven't been taking to reeducation camps or whatever else, but they're just no longer in this position. And they're now part of the economy in other ways, like they'll probably be the first set of highly competent technocrats and managers and so on. They'll probably be very well compensated for their time and expertise and whatever, whatever else. But to me, both a practical end of things, like taking away this ability to withhold investment and increasing our ability to democratically shape investment priorities and to continue down the road of social democracy and on normative grounds, my kind of egalitarian belief that ordinary people should have more stake in their lives in the workplace leads me beyond social democracy to socialism. So there's a tricky thing here. So in Ukraine especially, but in the Soviet Union, there's the Kulaks, the possible trajectory of fighting for the beautiful message of respecting workers' rights has this dynamic of making an enemy of the capitalist class too easily making an enemy of the capitalist class with a central leader, populist leader, that says the rich and the powerful, they're taking advantage of you. We need to remove them. We need to put them in camps, perhaps, not said explicitly until it happens. It can happen overnight, but just putting a giant pressure on that capitalist class. And again, the Stalin type figure takes hold. So I'm trying to understand how the mechanism can prevent that. And perhaps I'll sort of reveal my bias here, as I've been reading, I was going to say too much, maybe not enough, but a lot about books like Stalin's War on Ukraine. And just I've been reading a lot about the 30s and the 40s for personal reasons related to my travels in Ukraine and all that kind of stuff. So I have a little bit of a focus on the historical implementations of communism currently without

kind of an updated view of all the possible future implementation. So I want to lay that out there. But I worry about the slippery slope into the authoritarian figure that takes the sexy message, destroys everyone who's powerful in the name of the working class, and then fucks the working class afterwards. So first of all, I think it's worth remembering that the socialist movement had different outcomes across Western Europe and Eastern Europe. And in some of these countries, in Western Europe, there wasn't actually democracy before the workers movement and before the socialist movement. So the battle in Sweden, for instance, was about establishing political democracy, establishing true representation for workers. And that's how the parties became popular, the same thing in Germany too. Then it was the social democrats who were able to build political democracy. Then on top of that, had layers of economic democracy, social democracy.

The Swedish social democrats ruled basically uninterrupted from the early 1930s until 1976. It's kind of crazy to think about, but they were just in government. They were the leading member of government that a few different coalition partners would shift. Sometimes they were with the agrarians, sometimes they were with the communists briefly, but they ruled uninterrupted

and they lost an election in 1976 and they just left power. Then they got back into power in the 80s. So in other words, they created a democratic system, of course, with mass support of working class people. Then they truly honored the system because when they lost power, they lost power. They left power. There's plenty of cases like that across Europe and the world and in other countries like Korea and elsewhere with their workers movements. The most militant, the most class and trick workers, South Africa is the same way, created democratic systems.

Now, Russia, I think a lot of what happened had to do with the fact that it was never a democratic country. It was ruled by a party and the party itself was very easy to shift from a somewhat democratic party in Lennon's day to an authoritarian one in Russia. And there was no distinction then between the party and the state. So your authoritarian party then became authoritarian total control over the entirety of the state. Now, the fact that the Soviet system involved total state ownership of production meant that the authoritarianism of the party state could go even deeper into the lives of ordinary people compared to other horrific dictatorships like Pinochet's Chile and so on, when maybe you could find some solace just at home or whatever else. You didn't have the same totalitarian control of people's lives. But I would say that socialism itself is yield different outcomes. Now, on the question of polarization, I guess that implies that this polarization, this distinction is a distinction that isn't real in society and that is kind of being manufactured or generated. You mean the capitalist class and the working class just to clarify it? Yeah, okay. So in certain populist distinctions, the division is basically arbitrary or made up, the us versus them polarization, depending who the us and who the them are. You know, it's truly something that's manufactured. But capitalism itself as a system, as a system based on class division, whether you're your supporter or opponent, I think we should acknowledge it's based on class division, that is the thing creating that polarization. Now, I think what a lot of what socialists try to do is we try to take bits of working class opposition to capitalism, to their lives, to the way they're treated at work, and so on. And yes, we do try to organize on those bases to help workers take collective action, to help them organize and political parties, and so on to represent their interests, economic and otherwise. But the contradiction exists to begin with. And if anything, this system, which I'm proposing

democratic socialism, would be kind of a resolution of this conflict, this dilemma, this thing that has always existed since chieftain and follower, and so on. We've had class division since the Neolithic Revolution. I think this is a democratic road out of that tension and that division of humanity into people who own and people who have nothing to give but their ability to work. So that idea is grounded in going all the way back to Marx, that all of human history can be told through the lens of class struggle. Is there some sense, can you still make the case that this class difference is over exaggerated, that there's a difference, but it's not the difference of the abuser and the abused. It's more of a difference of people that were successful and people that were less successful. So I'll play devil's advocate, which is saying that maybe one could argue that in its purest, earliest stage, capitalism was based on a stark difference. But then since then, two things have happened. One, a bunch of socialists and workers have organized to guarantee certain rights for working class people, certain protections. So in our system now, there are certain safety nets less in the US than in other countries, but in a lot of countries are pretty extensive safety nets. Even like 40-hour work week, minimum wage, safety regulations, all that kind of stuff. And all those things are, in my mind, doses of socialism within capitalism. Because what you're doing is you are taking the autonomy of capitalists to do whatever they want with people contracted to them. And the only thing stopping them is them potentially being able to go to another employer. But even then, it's kind of a potentially race to the bottom. If you can't get more than \$2 an hour from any employer in your market, you're going to have to live with it. So one factor is we have built in those protections. So we've taken enough socialism into capitalism that you could say that at a certain point, maybe it makes a qualitative difference and not just a quantitative difference in people's lives. The other thing is, over time, we've gotten wealthier and more productive as a society. So maybe at some point, the quantitative difference of just more and more wealth means that even if in the abstract, the division between a worker and a capitalist is real, if that worker is earning a quarter million dollars a year and has a good life and only has to clock in 35 hours a week, 30 hours a week, and has four weeks of vacation, then isn't it just an abstract or philosophical difference? So I think you could level those two arguments. What I would say is that, one, a lot of these rights that we have fought for are constantly being eroded and they're underattacked, in part because the economic power that capitalists have bleeds into our political democracy as well. There's constant lobbying for all sorts of labor market deregulations and so on. I fundamentally believe that if tomorrow, all those regulations went away, capitalists would fight to pay people as little as possible and we would be back in 19th century capitalism and not because they're bad people, because if I'm running a firm and all of a sudden my competition is able to find a labor pool and is paying people less than me, I'm going to be undercut because they'll be able to take some of that extra savings and invest into new technology or whatever else and they'll gobble up my market share before long. And then also beyond that, I do think there's a normative question here, which is, now, do we believe that ordinary people have a capacity to be able to make certain decisions about their work? Do we believe they know more about their work than their bosses? Now, I don't think that's not true at every level, but I think there's no doubt that in workplaces, workers know how to productively do their task in ways that their manager might not know. I think we've all been in workplaces where we've had managers who kind of don't know what you do

or whatever else. And I think that collectively, if incentivized, we could have them one instead of hoarding that information since they're getting a stake in production and so on, they'd be able to more freely share it and be able to reshape how their day-to-day work happens. And also, with elected managers, you kind of take that up the chain. I think you'd have perfectly efficient market-based firms that could exist without capitalists. So there's a lot of things to say. Maybe within just a very low-level question of, if the workers are running the show, there's a brutal truth to the fact that some people are better and the workers know this. It's the Steve Jobs A-players. You want to have all the A-players in the room because one B-player can poison the pool because then everybody gets demotivated by the nature of that lack of excellence and competence. This is just to take sort of a crude devil's advocate perspective. Are the workers going to be able to remove the incompetent from the pool in the goal of towards the mission of succeeding as a collective? So I think that any successful model of socialism that involves the market, you need two things. One is at the micro-level, you need the ability to fire people and for them to exit firms, which might be a slower process in cooperative-based firms than it is in a capitalist firm without a union, but it would probably be akin to the process that would happen in a capitalist firm of which there are many with unions. So you need that. Then at the macro-level, you need firm failure. You need to avoid a dilemma that happened in Soviet-style economies, which was soft-budget constraints and firms basically not being allowed to fail because the government was committed to full employment, the firms employed people, so even inefficient firms were at the end of the day, they knew they were going to be propped up by the government, and they would be given all the resources they would need no matter how inefficiently they were using those resources to maintain employment. So I think you need both. Do you worry about this idea of firing people? Man, I'm uncomfortable with the idea, I hate it, but I also know it's extremely necessary. So is there something about a collective, a socialist system that makes firing, you said it might be slower, might it become extremely slow, too much friction? Isn't there a tension between respecting the rights of a human being and saying, you need to step up, maybe sort of the pause of the carrot, you really encourage fellow workers know when there's a person that's not pulling their side of doing as great of a job as it could be. But isn't the person that's not doing a great of a job going to start to manipulate the system that slows the firing in their self-interest? Well, I think there would be certain, so maybe another way to put it is think about like, if you're a partner at a law firm, right? I don't really know how law firms work. So I probably shouldn't use this analogy, but correct me if I'm wrong. But let's say you're a partner, you kind of have equity in your law firm or something beyond your billable hours. And let's say you're going to be fired from your law firm or they're laying off people or whatever else, they could just get rid of you. But they would also have to figure out how to kind of buy you out too, after a certain point. So I think that like in a cooperative firm, you'd probably have a system where you, after a certain point of working productively, you probably have a period where you get fired really quickly, no matter what. But once you have job security kicks in, you would be able to, you know, it would be a process. It would probably be like, you know, a day or two process to figure it out. Or maybe they would have a progressive discipline process, which is first you have to get a verbal feedback, and then maybe a written performance review, then you could be fired. I mean, that's how it works in a lot of workplaces with either unions or with just basic job security.

Most countries, that's how it works, because there's not at will employment in most countries. So I think that the real tension is if you fire someone, if you're condemning them to destitution, then morally, you'd really feel something there as you should as a human being concerned about other people. But in a social system or even basic social democratic system, there would be mechanisms to take care of that person. So one, if a firm is failing for any reason, they're getting out compete or whatever, whatever else, those workers would then land in the hands just for a little bit of the state, right? And there could be active labor market policies to retrain people to go into expanding sectors or your sector is now obsolete, but here you have these skills, you're going to be trained and hear some resources to kind of help you along your training. And then there's a bunch of firms hiring, so go on your way. Then also just with an expanded welfare state, being destitute in certain countries, being unemployed in certain countries is easier than in other countries or situations. So you still can fall back on that mechanism. And also my vision of market socialism, a democratic socialism, there would be an expanded state sector, not anything you can imagine, but the way in which there's more of a state sector in countries like Norway or Denmark than there is in the US. So there would be various forms of state employment and whatever, whatever else. So I mean, I think that the real question is, should being bad at your job or getting fired for any reason or getting laid off, should that be a cause to have you totally lose your shirt? Or maybe should you just have to rebound? Maybe you have less money for consumption or whatever else and you'll be on your way onto bigger and better things in a few months. So a strong social net in many ways make it more efficient to fire people who are not good at their job because then they won't be, that won't actually significantly damage their quality of life and they have a chance to find a job at which they can flourish. To step out into the macro, there's attention here as well. So you said that there's an equality between the classes, the capitalist class and the working class and sort of, there's a lot of ways you can maybe correct me on the numbers, but you could say that the top 1% of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 50%. That's not talking about perhaps capitalist class and the working class, but it's a good sort of estimate, right? The flip side of that, if you just look at countries that have more economic freedom versus less economic freedom, more capitalism versus less capitalism, their GDP seems to be significantly higher. And so at the local level, you might say that there's an inequality, but if you look historically over decades, it seems like the more capitalism there is, the higher the GDP grows and therefore the level of the quality of life and the basic income, the basic wealth, the average, even including the working class goes up over time. Can you see both sides of this? So I could definitely accept some of that premise. One, within capitalism, you want a bigger pie. Then if you divide up that pie, even if the bottom 10% of the working class share is less as a percentage, it's still more in raw terms, so it's better for everyone. The part that I would dispute is more economic freedom versus less economic freedom. So there's obviously some countries in which capitalism doesn't work and maybe economic freedom plays a role. If you're in a country like Egypt or India with a highly or previously highly bureaucratic system, so you need to get licenses to do anything and you need to run things for the state or you need to bribe someone to get an incorporation done or whatever else, that's in case in which I would accept the premise of economic freedom to take an entrepreneurial risk to start something new is limited. There's all sorts of factors in which it's too difficult to start a firm and it benefits

no one really except for whatever bureaucracy might be taking their 15% cut. But in general, I think in advanced economies, it doesn't really work that way. So think about it this way. If you pretend like we're back, I'm sorry to go to Scandinavia again, but this is a good example. Let's say you're back in the 1970s in Scandinavia or whatever else, you're in a country with extremely powerful unions. So the unions have a lot of labor rights, the state has certain high taxation, certain guarantees on you too, but you're a capitalist there. Now, what would you do if your capitalist competitors in the US were able to pay workers \$10 an hour and you have to pay them 20? You would probably, and assuming you can't just flee or shut down or whatever else, you'd probably find ways to use labor saving technology, right? That power of the high wages might encourage you to invest more in technology and to utilize people's time is better so they're more productive at work so they're not just sitting around or whatever else. So this really happened in practice in the Scandinavian countries in part because it was combined with a certain type of pattern wage bargaining. So I'll explain this really simply, but let's pretend that you're in a sector with three different companies. Let's say an automotive sector and I'll just say one is GM, one is Ford, one is Chrysler. Now, all these workers in your sector are all unionized. They're all, you know, Swedish UAW, whatever the equivalent is, members and they're all paid the same and the union is setting through marketing. The union is setting the wages across the sector. But the unions, and let's say GM is the most productive of these companies, Ford is number two, Chrysler is number three. The unions would intentionally set the wages, set their benchmark to Ford in the middle. So what that would do is say to Ford, okay, Ford will stay in business because they'll be able to meet the wage demands. Chrysler's might go out of business because, you know, they won't be able to meet the demands or they'll have to really adapt really quickly. They might have to lay off people, they might have to restructure. So union knows this in advance and all the auto workers know this. But the most efficient manufacturer GM now has excess profits because if they were negotiating with just the GM workers, the GM workers might even have been able to demand more. But instead, these workers are are pegging their wage demands to Ford's level. And GM is, in theory, able to expand and employ more people and adopt new production techniques with their surplus. Then those Chrysler workers would be absorbed by the state by active labor market policies, then put back to work for GM or for these expanding sectors. So in other words, you're now in a situation where the state has a pretty big role in your economy, taking a lot of your money and taxes. The unions are really shaping your life as a capitalist far more that would happen in a country like the United States. And yet still, despite your more limited economic freedom, you're still creating a more productive economy. So it could work. It just has the system has to be designed right. And I think social democracies were designed the right way. I think any future democratic socialism after social democracy would have to be designed the right way. Can you just link on that a little more the pattern wage bargaining? So GM is the most efficient. And Ford is the second most. Can you explain to me how, can you explain to me again, the wages, setting the wages to the Ford level, how that is good for GM? So how that encourages more of GM? This is just sectoral or actually in this case, centralized wage bargaining. So setting the wages at a level that Ford can afford, but a level that would probably be too expensive for Chrysler in the automotive sector would benefit would benefit GM because they're drawing what we could call excess profits. Because

GM, if the GM itself could potentially have to deal with just the enterprise of GM workers bargaining for wages, and if they saw their profitability was high, they would know their leverage and they would say, pay us even more or else we're going to go on strike.

But instead, they're accepting slightly lower wages than they would have otherwise had in return for the company having excess profits that they're through both the state, their union, and sometimes there's worker councils or whatever else, they're playing a role in saying, okay, we're going to make sure this excess profit is actually invested productively in order to expand employment and just output. Okay, can we talk about unions? In general, then, what are the pros and cons of unions? So the interest of the union, maybe you can correct me if I'm wrong, I have a lot to learn both about the economics and the human experience of a union. The union's interest is to protect worker rights and to maximize worker

happiness, not the success and the productivity and the efficiency of a company, right?

No, I would disagree. So I think a union's interest is in what's collectively bargaining on behalf of workers, because in certain cases, I am right now a manager at the nation magazine, right? If I have a problem with my working conditions or I need to raise or whatever else, I could with my skillset, my background, my role in the company, I could go to my boss, the owner of the nation and say, okay, I need to renegotiate my contract on these terms. I could bargain, right? Now, if I was an ordinary worker at like a CVS or something, if I didn't like my conditions and I went to my boss and said, hey, I need a \$2 raise and I need to be home by 830 because I have obligations at home, the boss would probably say, I'm sorry, that's not possible, right? Maybe try the right aid down the street or the Walgreens down the street or whatever. Now, if I went to the boss at a place like CVS or even better, if all the pharmaceutical workers at right aid CVS Walgreens went to our bosses and said, listen, we collectively need \$2 more and a better hour, shorter shifts or whatever else, then they would probably have no choice but to concede. You have to bargain collectively at any level if you're an ordinary worker. And there are some exceptions, but that's for certain highly skilled workers. But even in those cases, of course, all workers are skilled. I mean, just the technical definition. Even in those cases, a lot of those workers have to bargain collectively as well in order to get more wealth. But they cannot make their demands so excessive that their firm gets out of business. The workers only are workers as long as they're gainfully employed. So often unions will try to select their wage demands at such a level that it ensures that their firm will stay in business.

Yeah, but the problem is the way firms go out of business isn't by explosion, like a way popcorn starts getting cooked. At a certain moment, it just is over. It seems like the union can, through collective bargaining, keep increasing the wage, keep increasing the interest of the worker until it suffocates the company that it doesn't die immediately, but it dies in five years. So that might still serve the interest of the worker, but it doesn't serve the interest of society as a whole that's creating cool stuff and increasing a market that's operating and increasing cool stuff and constantly innovating and so on and creating more and more cool stuff and increasing the quality of life in general.

I just agree with the premise because I think even taking your example, that would be better for society. If a firm cannot pay its workers a living wage, but its competitors can, then that firm will either figure out a way to innovate, develop new techniques, new markets, new ways to

be productive, or it should go out of business. And it would be better for it to go out of business than to stay in business or to be artificially kept in business in any sort of way.

So that's a Chrysler, my old centralized bargaining example.

But then there is innovation costs money too. So the flip side of that,

I think to play devil's advocate, is that it incentivizes automotive industry is probably a good example of that. It incentivizes cutting costs everywhere and sort of whatever that's been making you money currently, figuring out how to do that really well without investing into the long-term future of the company for like all the different ways it can pivot, all the different interesting things it could do in terms of investing into R&D. Whenever there's more and more and more pressure on paying a living wage for the workers, it might suffocate and die over the next five, 10, 20 years, which might be a good destructive force from a capitalist perspective, but it might rob us of the Einstein of a company, of the flourishing that the company and the workers within it can do over a period of five, 10, 20 years.

Well, this is just a problem with a lot of capitalism, which is about short-termism.

Because the same thing could be said from you're starting a company, you have a plan for it to make a lot of money, but your investors want dividends right away. So you have to take away from your long-term R&D or other plans and deliver short-term dividends. That's often why a lot of, I think, R&D is often rooted in state institutions and research and whatever else is being drawn on. And also, I think that that's a reason why the state has some sort of role in fostering firms in either a, my version of a socialist economy or a capitalist economy or whatever else, to help with these time horizon problems. So I won't dispute that workers could play a role or wage demands could play a role in time horizon problems, but more often than that, it's coming from investors, it's coming from just a host of other market pressures that people might have. And I would say that in the real world, a lot of investment funds don't come from just retained earnings, it comes from a lot of sources. So I think this is a problem that could be solved through public policy, but definitely exists today as well.

So you mentioned living wage. Is there a tension between a living wage, and maybe you could speak to what a living wage means, and the workers owning all of the profit of the company? Sort of this kind of spectrum. No, I guess the spectrum is from no minimum wage, the lowest possible thing you could pay to a worker, then somewhere in that spectrum is a living wage,

and then at the top is like all of the profit from the company is owned by the workers.

So split to the workers. I mean, I think that any society is going to have to make distributional choices. You could have imagined a variety of capitalism in which workers are paid quite little, but there's extremely high taxation, and there's redistribution after the fact. You could imagine a system in which there's less taxation after the fact, but there's more guarantees and regulations on how much people are paid before the fact. In my vision of a social society, there would be similar way that unions work, and in my example, the centralized bargaining unions would work, that bargain at the sectoral level, and not just at the enterprise level like our unions do today.

There could be benchmarks set for different occupations or wages, and the reason why you would want a benchmark at a worker-controlled firm is that you don't want workers self-exporting themselves in order to gobble up market share, or because you don't want them collectively deciding, okay, we're going to invest in this longer-term time horizon and outcompete other

people that way. So you might say, okay, if you do this sort of clerical work, you have to be paid the equivalent of \$15 an hour, and that's a minimum, but on top of that, you get dividends from excess profits, and I think it would also have to be combined with public financing for expansions and for development, which could be done in quite a competitive way. So you could have a variety of banks, my vision, state-owned banks, but how would they decide who to invest in and who to not invest in, who to give a loan for expansion to and who not to? Because you don't want it to be like, oh, I'm going to invest in my nephew's firm and not this other firm, or I'm going to invest in this guy's firm because he's a Italian, but not this guy's firm because he's Albanian or whatever else. Just make it rational at the level of their goal is just like any other investment person at a bank today to maintain a certain risk profile and to have an interest yield and decide to invest on that basis. So if there's a huge automotive firm that has been on business for 50 years that needs a little operating cash, like yeah, they could get their \$50 million at a 3% loan. If you have some crazy blue sky idea and you managed to get it to that point, like maybe you and your friends would get it at 12% or something close to what a VC would offer today. So I only kind of go into these details not because to say that a system doesn't have to in advance map out all the different possibilities, but I think it does have to be willing to accept a lot of things that we know today. I can't give you a version of socialism that everything's going to be fine. We're going to live harmoniously and we won't have these sort of tensions and you could hunt in the evening and fish in the afternoon and write criticism, whatever else. I do hope that there's horizons beyond this that we could aspire to. I do have those visions, but for now, I think our task as socialists is to imagine a five minutes after midnight.

What can we do right away within our lifetime vision?

So that means through some level of central planning, reallocating resources to the workers?

So I think the primary mechanism in this private sector under socialism would be a market mechanism, firms competing against each other to expand, connected to a system of public financing. But even at that level, the individual bankers and public banks and so on would be operating based on their own rationality and the state would certainly shape investment decisions, but maybe no more than they do in a lot of capitalist systems. So the state might already today, in a lot of countries, decide we want to invest in green technology. So it's going to be favorable rates for people or tax credits for people investing in green technology. So the state already shapes investment. I think what should be centrally planned, and this is where I'm proud to sound like an old school socialist, is things like healthcare, things like transit, things like our natural monopolies of lots of types can be done very well through planning. And we already have plenty of examples. But a lot of this society, I think, would be the private sphere of worker-controlled cooperatives competing against each other, weak firms failing, successful firms expanding. And the banks, you're saying publicly or privately owned?

Publicly owned. Let's just put it all on the table that it's almost guaranteed that every system has corruption. So I guess the bigger question is, which system has more corruption? This one was central planning and worker cooperatives versus unfettered capitalism or any flavor of capitalism? I think any system has potential for corruption. I think it depends on how good your civil service is, how much oversight do you have to resolve a problem once it arises?

How does corruption happen in a social system? So you have to, again, I apologize, but the large scale examples of it. So we can look at Soviet Union, China, and Sweden, fundamentally different nations and histories and peoples and economic systems and political

systems,

but all could be called in part socialist. And so there's a ridiculous, almost caricature of corruption in the Soviet system, the gigantic bureaucracy that's built, where somehow corruption seeps in through kind of dispersion of responsibility that nobody's really responsible for the corruption.

I just had a conversation with Ed Calderon who fought the cartels in Mexico, and there's a huge amount of corruption in Mexico, but it's not like even seen as corruption. You understand when the cop pulls you over, you give this much money and so on. And so that kind of seems to happen

in certain systems. And it seems to have happened in socialist systems more than in capitalist systems

in the 20th century. Or maybe I'm wrong on that. No, I mean, I think in a lot of countries it's seen as the cost of doing business, right? Now, in particular countries built on a system of central planning, or just state allocation resources for the state, both produces and allocates and things run through bureaucracies, then I think you're much more apt to have corruption

than in a system with just a smaller sphere for the state. So for example, if you're in a hypothetical version of the US, you might see a lot more corruption like the post office, but you wouldn't have that corruption in your workplace. So you kind of learn to go around that. For one thing, even in state sectors, you can have, and this often is the case in democratic countries, you have a transparent civil service where people who are corrupt are prosecuted by judges where it's frowned upon and it just, over time, it goes away. So you go from having political machines that were

tied to certain, you know, had friends in certain police precincts and whatever else in the US in the 19th century and early 20th century to now today, that would be a huge scandal and unheard of, right? So I think over time, having an independent court system, having a truly meritocratic civil service can be implemented anywhere. I think though in the Soviet Union, the extra little bit that happened was you had a bureaucracy that just had so much power because the bureaucracy was producing and distributing everything and everyone was relying the bureaucracy with jobs. The way to social advancement was through the bureaucracies. So you end up with people like Khrushchev, you know, people going from peasants to, you know, supreme leaders of countries just through getting hooked up in the bureaucracy and advancing within it. And, you know, not all these were bad people. I don't think Khrushchev was that bad of a person or Gorbachev, you know, but this is their mechanism to advancement in systems like this. In the vision of democratic socialism that I propose, the state doesn't have that overriding power to begin with. But I think in either case, you know, corruption has arose in many different systems and has been successfully dealt with. I think on the developmental trajectory of even countries today that we think of as being very corrupt, corruption will, will, you know, fade away as well. But you definitely need a system in which individuals act, individuals are incentivized to act rationally. So if you're in a system in which cops who are corrupt are prosecuted and investigated and there's internal controls, a civilian border review and kind of an internal investigators within police departments or whatever else, there will be less corruption over time if people are punished. If you're in a system in which you're running a firm, you're the manager of a firm and elected manager, and everyone at that firm is trying for more efficiency and trying for more excess profits

or whatever else at the end of the day, you know, dividends at the end of the day, then if you try to hire your nephew and he's not good at your job, you're not going to win reelection, right? So you shouldn't, I think no system should rely on a change in culture that come naturally or some sort of individual altruism. I think the systems have to be constructed in such a way that it's not rational to behave poorly.

In sort of from a theoretical perspective, either a socialist or capitalist system can have either culture. But it seems like if you prioritize meritocracy, if the people that are good, whatever the good means, in terms of integrity, in terms of performance, in terms of competence, it seems like that leads to a less corrupt system. And it seems like capitalism, there's all kinds of flavors of capitalism, but capitalism, because it does prioritize meritocracy, more often leads to less corruption. So that's not a question of political or economic systems. It's a question of what kind of stuff do you talk about that leads to a culture of less corruption? First of all, I think in theory, maybe capitals and words, meritocracy, but I think in practice, anyone watching this or you and me would think of some of the people we know that work the hardest and they're often working class people, working the food service industry or whatever else, right? I think we don't have, in practice, I don't think we actually live in a society that rewards people for hard work. I think we reward people for a combination of accidents of birth plus hard work. Let me push back because, yes, so I agree with you, but let me push back on a subtle point, because I like to draw a difference between hard work and meritocracy, because as a person who works really hard, I work crazy hard, but I've also worked with a lot of people, they're just much better than me. So hard work does not equal skill, good, productive. So I just want to kind of draw that distinction, but I agree with you. I don't think our society rewards directly hard work or even high skill. There's many examples, at least we can see, that it does not do so. So we have an unequal distribution of talent, of course. So if we lived in society in which there was some level of acceptable inequality, and it's a normative kind of question of how much we would say it's acceptable, right? And that inequality was based on this unequal distribution of talent, then I think that would be fine with me, right? That would actually be a meritocracy. What I see in the US is often, okay, so if you are an upper middle class or rich kid, and you get a good education, you know, K through 12, out of those people, there will be some that work extra hard and go on to do incredible things or very successful, and there will be other people that do not, right? And decide for whatever reason, or go down a different path. And you could say maybe among that group of the upper middle class, there is a meritocracy, right? But they're actually given those opportunities to make their own decisions and to fail, whereas many, many other people, the vast majority of American society, I would say, 60 plus percent, don't really get those opportunities to make those choices to begin with. And I would aspire to the type of world at least as a first step in which our only inequalities are based on the or unequal innate kind of distributions of talent. Yeah, I guess a lot of people worry that when you have a socialist in any degree central planning, or perhaps a collective of workers, that it won't result in that kind of meritocracy that you're talking about. But you're saying that no, it's possible to have that kind of meritocracy. Think about it this way. The workers themselves are incentivized and are shaped by market forces too, right? They're trying to respond to consumer needs and preferences. They're trying to expand market share. They're trying to make money. So it requires no kind of leap into these people are going to be more altruistic or

whatever else, even on purely bourgeois terms, the same way you would maybe justify competitive capitalist firms. I think you could justify this system as long as you think that people, elected management can perform just as well. I think based on the experiences of cooperatives, we've seen that they can. And then at the state level, state bureaucracies have their own sort of sets of incentives. But in most systems that already have extensive state bureaucracies, these people at high levels are appointed or elected, they're held to certain standards. At the national level, a national government wants to maintain the tax revenue that they need to pay for services. We already, I think, have incentive structures that you could say that some people might just, I think, disagree with the normative thing of why would people have to own their own means of production, control their workplaces or whatever else? Why do we need this level of equality? Can't we just get by with our existing system, but just make things a little bit easier for capitalists to make money of than everyone will benefit or whatever else? I mean, that's a normative question. In my vision of socialism, there'll be plenty of multiple parties with different views and perspectives trying to either push us deeper into more radical forms of socialism or, on the other hand, to roll back to more capitalist forms of government. So I think that, again, you can't try to make up a perfect system and try to implement it. You have to do it as a process democratically and so on. So just philosophically, in your gut, you're more concerned about the innate equal value of human beings versus the efficiency of this wonderful mechanism that we call human civilization at producing cool stuff. Just like a gut. If we're sitting at a bar, that's where the gut feeling you come with. Of course, your mind is open, but you want to protect the equal value of humans. So I don't want to fight the hypothetical. So I'll say equality. I am concerned with equality, but I don't think the two are necessarily always in tension. But also, when you think about all the great things that human beings have produced, often, I think people today just look at the end outcome. We go to the pyramids and we'll marvel at the pyramids and the human achievement that it took to make it happen, but we won't stop to think about all the suffering that went into the making of that thing. So I think we lean in the opposite direction where we marvel at our achievements, but we don't often think about the suffering or exploitation that went into certain human achievements. I would love a society in which we could marvel at things and not have to worry about the exploitation that was involved, because there was no exploitation or oppression involved. There was just human ingenuity and creativity and collaboration. And to the degree which you may disagree to the degree there's a tension between the two, at least give equal weight to the consideration of the suffering and don't just marvel at the beauty of the creations. To the degree there is a tension between the two. What Stalin did, actually, too, it's not just capitalist, what Stalin did was he sacrificed whole generations because he thought that he was building something for the future, for future Russians to enjoy and for future people of the world to enjoy. And actually, that analogy that I just gave about the pyramids was written by Karl Kotsky, the German socialist, anti-Stalinist critic, when he was complaining about US journalists and others going to Russia in the 1930s and marveling at all the new industries. Are these people blind to the suffering behind these things they're marveling about? Speaking of which, I think you mentioned in the context of a social democracy that freedom of

speech and freedom of the press are basically the freedom of people to have a voice is an important component, which I think is something that caught my ear a little bit. Because if you think about the Soviet Union, one of the ways that the authoritarian regime was able to control, it's almost part of the central planning is you have to control the message and you have to limit the freedom of the press. So there's a kind of notion, especially in ideas or maybe caricatures of the ideas of cultural Marxism, sometimes caricatured even further as wokeism, that you want to be careful with speech. You want the sense of speech because some speech hurts people. So in some sense, you want to respect the value, the equality of human beings by being careful towards you say. So is there a tension there for you?

I think there's no tension. And in part, I think that it is very condescending or patronizing to assume that people can't take debate, that people can't either as a society or individuals visually be engaged in the exchange of ideas without or even very vigorous debate without being broken by it. It's just not the case. I'm basically a free speech absolutist. I mean, I would draw the line at obviously direct incitements of violence or certain other speech like that. But in general, you think a lot of people would be surprised to hear that?

No, I mean, not people who know my work. I mean, more generally, I think a lot of people on the right, even in the center, I think might have the idea that a lot of the far left wants to censor them. I think some of the center left wants to censor them. But I think on the far left, on the Marxist or Socialist left, I think that free speech is more or less the norm.

Yeah, where is the imperative the sense are coming from? Is this just some small subset of the left on Twitter? Is there some philosophical idea behind certain groups that like, if we're to steal man, the case, and which group actually has the interest of humanity in mind in wanting to censor speech? I think we might need to just take it case by case for an example by example, because honestly, I would have to think about a particular case. But let's just say generally that a lot of American liberalism rightly sees the revolution around the civil rights, and later the extension of this rights revolution for gay rights and so on as being a very positive achievement in the last half century. And I completely agree. Now, for me, now that we've won those rights, a lot of our battle for change needs to go beyond the representational realm and needs to really reground itself in the material bread and butter struggles of ordinary people trying to survive, the battle for good healthcare for all Americans, and so on. These are my immediate demands. I think there's a segment of American liberalism that doesn't want to go in that confrontational economic direction and wants to skirt away from battles over things like universal healthcare and so on, and really are just still caught at this battle over rights representation. And it's devolved in such a way that they feel like they need to make change. The way they make change is only through interventions and culture, because they don't really have the same sense of class and class struggle that agree or disagree with it. It's a very material plane. So instead, you know, they look at comedians who said the wrong thing or they look at all sorts of other ways to make change. It's not really making a change. It's just making them look bad and making our culture worse. And I think that that's where a lot of it comes from. But I think that a lot of the left, even the left that's much more in two battles over race and lots of other stuff, like real serious anti-racist on the left. Of course, I'm an anti-racist, but a lot of my work is focused on the primacy of class. But even these people are very concerned about material struggles and issues, and they don't really care about these issues they think are

ephemeral kind of issues. So when you focus exclusively on language, that somehow leads you astray. Like on being concerned about language without like deeper economic inequalities and so

on, you just become an asshole. That's on Twitter pointing out how everything, how racist everyone is. So the anti-racism becomes a caricature of anti-racism. Exactly, because anti-racism was really about the struggle of people for equal rights and voting. It was about the struggle for people who were trapped into bad neighborhoods because they couldn't get decent jobs and their neighborhoods were redlined or whatever else. It was really like a struggle for survival. And what was the main demands, like the language of this one? It was the march for jobs and freedom.

It was the slogan, I am a man, asserting the kind of universal dignity of people. This is what the civil rights movement was about. And it wasn't surprised, there was a lot of self-described socialists, people like Bayard Rustin, Eiffelt Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr. I mean, these were people who were Ella Baker, they were socialists. And I think a lot of Americans agree with them with their immediate demands, even though they weren't themselves socialists, but it was a very materialistic struggle. And I think a lot of this has been co-opted into just some sort of vague and just disconcerting complaints about language or culture and so on.

Martin Luther King was a socialist. To what degree was he a socialist? I would love to learn about that. Martin Luther King, I think, broadly called himself, at various points in his life, a Christian socialist or a democratic socialist, especially after his speech against the Vietnam War and the Riverside Church. I think that was 67. The last years of his life, he became much more involved in struggles against war and also struggles for workers' rights. He was assassinated when he was at a rally at workers' rights, where he thought the next battle was going to be an economic battle. He had this famous line where he said,

I don't just want to integrate the lunch counter if it means that we can't afford to order a burger while we're there. That was the line along those lines. And I think that got to his point, where the civil rights struggle was part of a step of building sort of a wider movement.

So he and these other civil rights leaders were very much interested in working with organized labor, working with the left as it was constructed then, and building some sort of mass base for not just rights, but redistribution. It's fascinating. It's fascinating which figures self-identified and more in part socialists. Albert Einstein was one. Albert Einstein wrote an article for the first issue of this left-wing magazine. It's actually still publishing today called Monthly Review. And I think 1949, and his article is called Why Socialism. I don't think it's paywalled, so people should check it out. But yeah, Einstein was one.

So probably the central idea is the pacifist, the anti-war idea for him? Or no?

Honestly, it's been so many years since I read it. I think it was actually more economically focused, but I would need to go back and read it. But is war in general a part of the fundamental ideas that socialists are against, democratic socialists are against? What's the relation between socialism and war? So I think that traditionally in the socialist movement, war was associated with capitalist competition and international competition. And you can look at World War I as very much a case where different nations were competing with each other and developing quite violent rivalries that was in part based on competition and the periphery over access to markets and colonies and whatever else. So it was very easy to draw a direct correlation. I'm opposed to imperialism, the domination of strong nations, dominating

smaller nations. I wouldn't call myself a pacifist. I think most socialist wouldn't call themselves pacifists because there are some struggles that are worth fighting for. There's national liberation struggles and so on where if there's no democratic avenue for change, positive change has been made through armed revolts around colonialism and whatnot. But we're living in an age where hopefully, I know neither of us have children, but our children or children and children in the future won't have to live through war. And that is one thing that as countries have gotten more developed. As the world has changed, we've actually seen less and less war. I won't dispute Pinker on this. I think it's true. Obviously Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in Ethiopia is an exception, but on the whole, I think we're going in that direction. But I think it's always been a major organizing plank of socialists against war and against just kind of this sense of right-wing nationalism and national identity that often leads to war. And obviously not everyone on the right has embraced that. A lot of libertarians are consistently anti-war as well. But I think the right ideologically has been associated with war, even if some advocates of capitalism have not been. Then there's the military industrial complexes, which is the financial machine of the whole thing. I presume, well, since a lot of that is government, what's the relationship to socialism and the military industrial complex? Well, a lot of it's government contracts, but it's privately produced. My company's the Glocky Market Martin and things like that. You could draw a very crude, materialist connection between any of these things and to kind of prove an ideological point. But we could produce just as many arms and then just bury them or never fire them off or whatever else. Obviously, there are companies that have a vested interest in heightening up tensions or saying that we need to buy a new weapon system to be prepared for a conventional war with China, Russia. Meanwhile, I think we all know that if there's going to be conventional war between these countries, it's going to lead to something worse. No amount of advanced fighter jets is going to make a difference. But I try to avoid crude or causal connections, even though there are relationships. It's kind of like the old slogan, which was quite an effective slogan in the early 2000s. My first anti-war marches when I was a teenager, I definitely have shouted at no war for oil. Both is correct in that it gets to what people's senses of what's going on and how it's bad, but also analytically, it's kind of wanting to explain what really happened or why we ended up in the Middle East, which is a much more complex geopolitical story. Yeah, and it is a story of geopolitics. It's perhaps less a story of capitalism or socialism. It's a story, it's a geopolitical story that I think actually operates outside of the economic system of the individual nations. It has to do more with, honestly, in part, egos of leaders. There's an international battle for resources, but surely there's alternatives. Yeah, definitely. And I think that part of what being a socialist is about dreaming in the long term about a different sort of world without, in my mind, needless divisions of people into nations with standing armies. I'm sure we'll still have pride about where we're from, and there'll still be distinctive cultural features and so on about where we're from. We definitely would, at least for the foreseeable future, be divided into places as administrative units, but the idea that there should be a Mexican army and an American army and a Russian army and a Ukrainian army is just on the face of it. I think the long run will be seen as ridiculous, just like we see it as ridiculous today, looking back at the idea that

a lord from London would be engaged in civil strife with a lord from Liverpool and a bunch of peasants would die. Just kind of on the face of it just seems kind of ridiculous that these different places would have their own banners and lords and armies. I think in the long run, you might have to zoom out a thousand years, but in the long run, people will say the same about nation states and standing armies and battles over specks of dirt that mean nothing in a cosmic sense.

Yeah, no, for sure, aliens would laugh at us or humans that go far beyond earth and look at the history. Well, most of the history will be forgotten because if humans successfully expand on into the universe, just the scale of civilization will grow so fast that the bickering of the first few thousand years of human history will be seeming significant.

There's a very Marxist idea that I both appreciate in one way, but on the other hand, it's kind of scary, which is that human history is only now beginning before we're in prehistory, but in the future, we'll be in kind of real history. I think that a lot of really important history has already happened, and I think posterity will remember, and I think that it will be easier to assign certain people the role of villains, the people, not to engage in the contentious topic, off topic of Ukraine or whatever else, but the idea that one government or a bad one would launch more to recover or to take several hundred square miles of territory and tens of thousands of people will die, I think seems absurd to us, many people today, luckily, but it would not have seemed to serve 50, 60 years ago, it would have just been a normal thing, these kind of territorial disputes and so on. I think projecting in the future, I think within our lifetimes, we'll live to see that kind of conflict be eradicated, and in part, you could say that, why? I think it's because of popular pressure and organization, so you could say the pro-worker, socialist organizing part of it, making it less normal. If you're a capitalist, you could say, well, markets are more interlinked, so war is even more irrational. I don't really have a firm answer or whatever it is. I think it's a good thing. You mentioned Marxist view of history. It's kind of interesting to just briefly talk about, what do you think of it? What do you think of this Marxist view of how the different systems evolve from the perspective of class struggle as we were talking about? Well, I fundamentally, I'm a Marxist, I fundamentally believe in the broad contours of historical materialism, but I think we should be clear of what Marxist theory tells us and what it doesn't tell us. I think Marxist theory tells us pertinent things about how societies evolve, about how the distributional resources work in any given society, who owns, who doesn't, how the conflict, distributional conflicts, and so on. I think Marxism can tell us a lot.

How surplus is distributed. Exactly. Exactly. What it can't tell us is, as a friend put it, the sex appeal of blue jeans or whatever else. That's beyond what Marxism is meant to do. What economic system can't tell us about the sex appeal of blue jeans?

No economic system, but socialism in the Soviet sense, when it was turned into the Soviet style, dialectical materialism was meant to tell us everything from explain genetics and agriculture and whatever else in a very disastrous way. I definitely don't believe in the application of these ideas in an extremely wide way. Also, I'm a Marxist because it's a framework that helps me understand pertinent facts about the world. If at some point I no longer think the framework is doing that, I will not be a Marxist. I'm a socialist on normative grounds because I have certain beliefs about the equality of people because I believe we should have a society with liberty, with equality, with fraternity. I hope I'll always be a socialist until the day I die,

but it's kind of a very unscientific or unserious thing to say, this is my framework from beginning to end for the rest of my life. From a perspective of history, you should say that Marx says that societies go through different stages. It could be crudely summarize primitive communism, imperialism, maybe slave society, feudalism, defined by mercantilism, then capitalism and socialism, and finally, stateless communism. Did I miss something there?

I mean, I think that was close enough. I think that's definitely true of Marxist theory, that the contradictions of capitalism, the fact that it has brought together all these workers, all these materials and whatever else, and it's now allowing us to socially create wealth on a mass scale, but that wealth is that process is being privately directed, and also the surplus is being privately appropriated, is a contradiction, and that would lead to some sort of rebellion or revolution or change, and eventually this contradiction would be a fetter on production too, so we would have to move into socialist society.

But actually, the backtrack, so in terms of contradiction, so it starts when we're in a village, hunter-gatherers, that's what you call primitive communism, where everyone's kind of equal, it's kind of a collective. Hold on a second, and then inequality's form of different flavors, so that's what imperialism is, is one dude rises to the top and has some control of different flavor. That's what feudalism, when you have one dude at the top and you have merchants

doing some trading and so on, and then that leads to capitalism, when you have private ownership of companies and they do some, they result in some kind of class inequality, and eventually that results in a revolution that says, no, this inequality's not okay, it's not natural, doesn't respect the value of human beings, and therefore it goes to socialism, where there is, under Marx's view, I guess some role for the state, state is doing some redistribution, and then the pure communism at the end is when it's a collective, where there's no state-centralized power. What's part of that is wrong? No, I think, and broadly, the Marxist theory of history is about different types, different modes of production that existed various times, based on material conditions. In the early times, in this theory, there was not much surplus being generated, and there was generally egalitarian societies. Then, as we became agricultural, as society developed, there was more surplus being produced, and then there was a group of people that were ruling classes of their age that controlled and distributed that, controlled that divisional labor, and appropriated more of that surplus for themselves, and they weren't involved in productive labor. In the early print of society, everybody's involved in productive labor. Later on, you had castes of priests who did nothing but pray and write and lecture people all day. You had kings and rulers and barocrats and traders and so on. You have a more complex division of labor, but also more inequity driving out of that. Capitalism was a revolutionary system because it took away, one, it made us tremendously more productive. It expanded production beyond our wildest imaginations, but it also no longer bound workers to their lord or manor or whatever else. They were now free to move, free to engage in contracts with employers, and so on. Even though workers are now producing all this tremendous wealth, and even though productive forces had been matured in such a way, they were ultimately taken away from all the wealth they were created. They got some of it back. They were in wealthy societies, but they were all their collectivity together producing this wealth, and that was a potent force. So Marx theorized that would lead to a revolutionary change in a socialist direction. I think, in fact, what we saw was that, yes, workers are dependent on,

on, capitalists are dependent on workers, but the dependency is obviously symmetrical in the sense that workers are also dependent on capitalists. But in fact, it's an asymmetrical dependency in that ordinary workers need their jobs more than capitalists need the contribution of individual workers. So it became kind of a collective action problem where you would need the mass of workers to get together, decide to change things, but also people would be afraid because they'd be dependent on their jobs for their livelihood and so on. So revolution became a lot harder than people thought, especially in democratic countries, where workers had certain outlets and certain powers and rights and responsibility. It's no surprise that where you did have socialist revolutions, they were in places like the third world, postcolonial states trying to merge out of colonialism. They were in places like China and Russia, autocratic countries, and never in an advanced capitalist country. Now, in Marxist theory of history, even as interpreted by a lot of smart Marxists like G.A. Cohen and others, there is a certain inevitability to socialism after capitalism. The way that I would put it myself is, I kind of have a more, I guess you could say, like Kantian view of it. I think socialism is something that ought to happen, but it's not something that necessarily will happen and will need to organize and persuade and also potentially, again, the key part of any social system that's democratic is you have to allow for the possibility of a democratic revision to a different sort of system. So I'd be more than happy in my vision of socialism for there to be capitalist parties getting, hopefully, three, four or five percent of the vote, maybe a lot more, in the same way that in the U.S. or a republic, we could right now have a monarchist party. No one's going to support a monarchist party in the U.S. in serious numbers. Although that's gaining popularity.

In Europe or elsewhere?

No. In anarchist tradition, aren't they saying that one of the ways you could have a leader in monarchy because they're more directly responsible to the citizens? If you have a leader, it's healthier to have a monarch. Anyway, I'm not familiar with this, but I have heard this stated multiple times. The left-wing anarchist traditions, like anarcho-syndicalism or whatever else, their slogan is kind of no kings, no gods, no masters or whatever, so no bosses. They definitely would not agree with that, but I'm not familiar enough. Anarchism runs a gamut from left to right in an interesting way.

I'll have to ask about that. You don't believe Marx's theory of history in the sense that every stage is a natural consequence of every other stage. Of course, he would predict that somebody like you must exist in order for those stages to go from one to the next because you have to believe ought in order for action to be taken to inspire the populace to take action. Two things. One is, I do broadly believe in Marx's theory of history because it just explaining how productive forces develop in the relations of production in any given system. I guess there's a theory of transition from capitalism to socialism that Marx didn't really spell out, but it was implied that it would naturally happen. Marx was living in an era of tremendous upheaval. Marx himself actually saw when he was living in London in the 1870s, the Paris Commune. When workers took over for just a few months, but they took over, the producers of Paris took over the city, basically created their own government, their own system, and so on. He was living through an era of upheaval and angles especially oversaw and was the mentor to all these rising socialist parties. He was very closely collaborating

with socialists in places like Britain and Germany when they were drafting their first programs for the Social Democratic Party. It felt like this was going to happen. It felt like this rising working class would take power, but I think the stability of the system was underestimated. It's easy to see the contradictions in the system, but can you see its mechanisms of stability? The way in which mass collective action or revolutions, more of the exception or the norm, could you have imagined, if your remarks, not only how much wealth the system would produce

over time, which I think you could have imagined, but also developments like the welfare state and mass democracy and universal suffrage, which might have changed how workers relate to the system or operate within it. I think it's just a transition part that I think wasn't spelled out properly, but I think in either case, as socialists, we can assume that history is working in our favor. We just need to hold out and wait for the inevitable revolution. We have to convince people of both, one, the struggle for day-to-day reforms and why it's important to be politically organized, why it's important to be a member of a union or to advocate for things like universal healthcare or whatever else to try to build the cohesion and sense of self of the class. Then ultimately, for the desirability once we accomplish it, once we build social democracy of going beyond social democracy, which is, of course, the challenge.

Now, I don't think it requires leadership from the outside. I think there are plenty of organic leaders that have emerged from the working class that have advocated for socialism from the working

class. If you look at the class composition during the glory days of the European socialist parties, this was very much a working class parties and organizations. It's only been the last 30 years that it's been taken over by professionals. Not coincidentally, they have accomplished very little in those 30 years. That's the practical and the pragmatic. Can we actually jump to the horizon? As you mentioned, as a social democratic, you're focused on the policies of today, but you also have a vision and dream of a future. Mark's did as well, solve the perfect communism at the end. Can you describe that world? Also, is there elements to that world that has elements of anarchism? Like I said, there's Michael Malice next door. Like anarcho-communism, I don't even know if I'm using that term correctly, but basically no central control. Can you describe what that world looks like? I think the traditional socialist vision of if you want to call it full communism would be very similar to the anarchist vision of a world without coercion, mass abundance, and so on. I myself don't share that vision. I believe that we will always need to have a state in some form as a way to, one, even just mediate difference. I think traditionally a lot of Marxists have thought that after you remove the primary contradiction, quote unquote, of class, that all other political questions would be resolved. I think that's a lot behind a lot of the thinking of we're going to have a full communism after politics. I don't think there will be an after politics. I think for one thing, let's say, I'll give you another Northeast example, let's say me and you are trying to, with different groups of people, we're trying to figure out how to build a crossing of the Hudson River. And for various reasons, you and the people around you want to build a bridge, me and the people around me want to build a tunnel. That's a question that you will probably need a mediation for, right? You'll need, one, it's a big project, so there'll be a very complex division of labor and so on. But even beyond that, just politically,

you will need the state to mediate the difference. You'll need to have a vote, have a vote that people trust, have institutions of people trust, and so on to make a decision. Society is never going to go beyond that decision-making.

You don't think it's possible outside of the state to create stable voting mechanisms? Or is human nature going to always seep into that?

I just wonder why we would have to if the state is democratic and responsive. The state isn't authoritarian. So it might not be called a state, but it would function as a state, right? But why not just call it a state? But in other words, if you don't have something like that, then don't you have a greater risk of tyranny or a tyrant emerging in the vacuum? So I think people's fear of the state is what would happen if the state had too much power. And I think that's legitimate fear. That's why we have democratic checks on state power and certain guarantees of freedom and so on. But yeah, I guess I just wonder, I'm more afraid of the vacuum and not having a democratic, responsive state and what the world would turn into. And also, I'm just not a utopian thinker, if that makes sense. I like to think that I'm an egalitarian thinker. I'm a socialist. But my mind just goes to like, you know, I could see a vision of the future that I would like like 50, 60 years from now. Maybe there's some sort of future of superabundance and automation. And there's some sort of techno utopian future. We don't want some of those things that would exist in my five minutes for now vision of socialism. But I just don't see it. And in general, I'm kind of wary of visions of change that seem like they're not built off little thing pieces that we have now and not built off history and experience or whatever else. I don't want a year zero. I don't even like the term prehistory because I think there's a lot in history that I want. I want Shakespeare under socialism. I want a lot of things that I think we should be grateful for. There's a part of tradition that I think that exists that's hierarchical and exploitative and whatever else. But there's another part of tradition that's our sense of place and belonging and our connection with the past and hopefully the future. And I want to keep that. Yeah. So you're worried about revolution or otherwise a vacuum being created and you're worried about the things that might fill that vacuum. So the anarchists often worry about the same mechanism of the state that controls voting or keeps voting robust and resilient and stable. The same mechanism also having a monopoly on violence. That's the tension. So they get very nervous about a central place having a monopoly on violence. Whereas if there is going to be a place within a monopoly on violence, let's just say we temporarily take that for granted, should it not be a place with a skilled, elected, accountable, transparent civil service with a democratic mandate and so on. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well put. Speaking of AI, just to go into that tangent, do you think it's possible to have a future war? It's the 50 years. 50 hundred years where AI, there's an AI sort of central planning, sort of the, we've removed some of the human elements that I think get us into a lot of trouble. Like you could, you can take a perspective on the Soviet Union and the flaws of the system there have less to do with the different ideologies and more to do with the humans and the vacuums and how humans fill vacuums and the corrupting nature of power and so on. If we have AI that's that's more data driven and is not susceptible to the human elements, is that possible to imagine such a world almost like a phono sci-fi perspective? Maybe in the future you could imagine certain calculation problems that arose during central planning solve through advanced computing. But I would say that there's another whole set of problems with the system that were incentive problems and I'm not sure how that advanced computing would solve the incentive

problems of how do you get people to actually produce things that other people want? Kind of that informational question, how do you communicate without endless meetings or someone reading your brain? What do you actually want? So there's that kind of informational question, but then there's the incentive of how do you get people to work efficiently at work and how do you get firms to use their resources that they're getting more efficiently and I think solving the calculation problem solves some of these questions but not all of them.

But that's kind of a who knows, but if your vision of the future requires some sort of leap into technological unknown that's very hard to advocate for today.

It's exciting to consider the possibility of technology empowering a better reallocation of resources. If you care about the innate value of human beings and think of the mechanism of reallocation of resources is a good way to empower that equality, it's nice to remove the human element from that. If you work really hard and you're really good at your job, it's nice to be really data driven in allocating more resources to you.

So kind of like I kind of think that the agency part requires human beings and conscious human activity. So I think if you have a sort of planning system that works and let's say the technology is there for it to work, I would want it to be democratic planning in such a way that there's a human element, there is some debate and deliberation society. And also even in my vision of socialism with the state sector and state investments and so on, I want there to be more public discussion and debate about certain things. So it's not just left to technocrats because you'd want to live in society where you just find out the next day that there's some massive infrastructure project that you haven't had a chance to think about or debate or feel like you're participating in. And debate is not just facts and logic. That's why if the whole universe was about facts and logic, computers could do a better job of that. There's something about humans debating each other that goes into the difficult gray areas of what it means to be human or what it means to have a life that's worth living. That requires humanity. And I'm also worried about while I'm excited by the possibility of AI controlling everything, half joking. But the reason I'm really terrified of that is because usually there's a possibility of a human taking control of that system. So you now start to get the same kind of authoritarian thing. Well, I am a human, I'm smart enough to be able to control this AI system. And I will do based on what this AI system says, what's good for you. It's kind of like talking down to people and then use that AI system to now have the same kind of thing as Hall or Moore in 1930s. And also our preferences might change. So an AI system might say the goal of humanity is to just increase infinitely efficiency or increase output, whereas we might collectively decide that we have enough and we want to have a trade-off. And I think that we need a system that allows for people to make certain trade-offs. And have more of this leisure that I've been learning about from you. This is a very interesting concept, leisure. How do you spell that? If we can step into the practical, where we're talking about historical and philosophical, into the practical of today, what are some of the exciting policies that represent democratic socialism today, modern socialism? I think you mentioned some of them, Medicare for all or universal health care, something you haven't mentioned is tuition-free college, increase in minimum wage, maybe stronger unions like we talked about. What are some ideas here? What are some ideas there's especially policy, especially exciting to you? Well, I think that hours reduction has always been an important demand for socialists. So I mean, it's been a reality in certain countries like France in recent decades, where part of the logic is, if you have a bunch of people working

for 40 plus hours a week, and you also have some unemployed people who would like more employment, then it's not as if you're some game, you could reduce hours to 35 hours and still maintain the same output by employing more people to kind of fill the slack in hours. So one, I think it's a solid heuristic thing in working class movements between unemployed and employed workers. I also think that, yeah, it gives people more time. So Marx was a big advocate in his day of a 10-hour bill in the UK that would have reduced the hours of working time and reduced child or eliminated or reduced child labor and other things as well. And part of it was, this is a radical demand because it's reducing the sphere as you saw of exploitation. So it's putting limits on how much time the capitalist can take from ordinary workers and how much freedom they would have. With healthcare, one, I just think it's a government healthcare system. You could tell me that you don't want it in the US, but you can't tell me it doesn't work because we've seen it work in every other major industrial system in different forms. So what does that usually involve? What does universal healthcare involve? So there's different varieties. In the UK, for instance, they have a national health service in which medical personnel and hospitals are run directly by the state. It's almost like a mini Soviet system, to be honest, but just for healthcare. And it works pretty well just for healthcare. And I think it's one example of the way in which you could actually take the market. So I give you a vision of socialism that involves a lot of market, but I think there's certain spheres where you could remove the market from and still have an efficient system, in part because this is an area in which people don't have, obviously for cosmetic procedures or whatever, they have preferences. But for most routine things that people do in healthcare, they just need to see a doctor. They need to get diagnosed. Some of these systems have had trouble with waitlist for specialists or whatever. That's more like an allocation problem of if you want more specialists, you pay specialists more. Like this is just problems that could be solved by like through the mechanisms of a planning and government-run healthcare. So that's kind of the most left-wing that you could get is the system in the United Kingdom. Beyond that, you have a system like Medicare for All where you say, all right, most of the doctors, besides for public hospitals that already exist, are going to be privately employed by hospitals. Now, hospitals are going to be private. But instead of having all these different insurance carriers, we're just going to have one national insurance carrier that we're all going to pay into. That national insurance carrier is going to negotiate the price of healthcare with doctors, a price of drugs with pharmaceutical companies and so on to hopefully reduce prices and to implement a different little bit of planning into the system. Because if there's only one big national insurance company, that company has a lot of weight and power. But you could still visit your same doctor and it's not as radical of a shift in that direction. And that's the dominant demand of Bernie Sanders and the left right now. There's 30 plus million people in the US that would be insured that currently aren't insured if we move to this system. There's a lot of other people that are underinsured or worried about how to pay co-pays or premiums involved. I think it would be a net benefit for the vast majority of the US population, even if it was offset with certain taxes because we spend a lot of money out of pocket with health insurance. And it's a demand also that's widely popular. So for me, it's almost like if you're trying to build support for something like socialism. We were talking

this loft division of socialism after capitalism or what worker ownership, the means of production would look like in practice and so on. And by the way, you're one of the few interviewers who will ever ask me any of the details. So it's good that I've been thinking of a rough sketch in my head for the last whatever 16 years I've been a socialist. But we have to start in the here and now. And if you can't convince people that the state could play a big role in their health insurance and you can convince Americans and a whole host of other sectors that they should be living in something closer to their social democracy, how are you going to convince those people that there should be worker ownership of the means of production? It's kind of a ridiculous like leap if you don't have the credibility as the group of people organizing for universal healthcare, organizing for a \$15 bin of wage, unable to get the goods. And also in practice, as we fight for these reforms, ordinary people will have a better sense, at least my hope is of what it means to be involved with politics and what politics can do for their lives. It's positive because right now when we talk about politics, it often just seems that we're talking about like a very glib cultural conflict removed from the things that are important in our lives. Whereas in truth, I think politics can be a tool for us to make our lives better.

Yeah. And there's like deep ideas here where in some sense, universal healthcare and worker collectives are not so radically different that there's just, there's philosophical ideas to explore and accept. And also from my perspective, at least, maybe I'm wrong on this, but it seems like with a lot of things at the core of politics, the right answer from an alien perspective is not clear. Like everybody's very certain with the right answer. Everyone's certain universal healthcare is terrible or in the case of universal healthcare, majority of people think it's a good idea, but I don't think anyone knows. Because I think that depends on cultural history, on the particular dynamics of a country, of a political system, on the dynamics of the economic system in this country, of the changing world. The 21st century is different than the 20th century. Maybe the failures of communism in the 20th century will not be repeated in the 21st century. Or the flip side of that may be capitalism will actually truly flourish with the help of automation in the 21st century. I don't think anyone knows. So people like you are basically arguing for ideas, and we'll have to explore those ideas together. Why do you think if universal healthcare is popular, why don't we have universal healthcare in the United States?

Well, democracy is a great thing. Political democracy is wonderful. It came from the struggles of ordinary people to expand suffrage and so on. But the economic sphere, entrenched power in the economic sphere, bleeds into our political democracy. So I think there's a lot of people with a vested interest in not having universal healthcare. There's large industries with a vested interest in not having universal healthcare. They pay for ads, pay lobbyists, they influence government, and they have made it very difficult. So you can't get universal healthcare

done without the bill, even if you pass something and you're trying to make a change. Like, Obamacare was supposed to have a public option. Everybody's been running on a public option in the Democratic Party for 12, 13 years. Why don't we have a public option?

People know that if people have the choice of bombing into a government plan, that might be the slow road to really having universal healthcare. So I think a lot of it's opposition. Do you like that idea of the public option? Maybe you can, like, because isn't there complexities like pre-existing conditions? So isn't a public option mean you can not have any insurance until you get into trouble? And then you can, if it covers pre-existing conditions, just start paying for insurance.

Then therefore, young people don't pay for insurance. Isn't it better to go full in?

I don't support a public option in part because I think if we allow politicians to just say, hey, I support a public option, it's just kind of a way to signal your support for universal healthcare, but give us nothing. And I think that's what we saw with Biden and a lot of other politicians that have supported a public option. I think in practice, if a public option is defined in such a way that it just means you by default can just opt in to a public plan and let's say hypothetically, you don't even have to pay for it, then it's just a backdoor to universal healthcare really quickly because I think the vast majority of people who aren't currently covered, and also a lot of employers, to be honest, would probably drop their private coverage if they knew their employees can just get a public option and maybe would only provide supplemental insurance or whatever

else. But I think the broad overarching point of all these demands is to say that socialists need to be really connected to the day-to-day struggles of people to just improve their lives.

So if you're feeling like you're paying \$400, \$500 on the Obamacare market for health insurance and that's hampering your ability to do what you want to do in your life, then maybe you would support a candidate who's for universal healthcare. If you feel like you're struggling to find work that you could afford to pay your rent with or whatever else, maybe you'll support a candidate committed to all sorts of mechanisms to reduce housing prices or increase your power as a tenant and whatever else. So I think it's like these day-to-day concerns need to be connected to the more abstract and lofty vision of change. Otherwise, our politics just becomes this fantasy world thing that's nice ideas to think about or debate but really won't make much of a difference in people's lives. What do you think about free college? Should college be free?

So I would say free college is not at the top of my list of priorities, but it definitely should be free in my vision of a just society. What is it that you're just to clarify? Is the universal healthcare up there? Yeah, universal healthcare is probably far higher in my priorities than free college. I think right now the way our system is built, when someone goes to college, they're given credentials, they're given a degree, they carry with them for the rest of their life. It gives them a chance to join a privileged part of the labor market. It's not a zero-sum game. I don't want college-educated people to think that non-college-educated people are their enemies and vice versa because a lot of them are just ordinary working-class people trying to survive and they're in different areas or in different sectors. Some of them are in nursing sectors where they need a college degree and so on. But if you just make college tuition free, but you don't also make trade skills and other things free for someone to learn how to become an electrician or a plumber or whatever else, then to some degree you're privileging one sector of the labor market over another. I would advocate just if you're going to make something like that free, you just have to make sure that you're doing an egalitarian way and that one, the options, the routes to college are more equal. There's more investment in K-12 education so that more kids in rough neighborhoods have the chance to go to college and for those that choose the trade route from any part of the country, that they're given the skills and resources for vocational trainings and that those are also free. It just feels like in terms of order of operation, I would just start with K-12 education, improving it and whatever else, then college after. But I'm not opposed to it.

So does that improving K-12 education, does that mean investing more into it? Is it as simple as just increasing the amount of money that's invested in public education?

In general, when it comes to the public sector or any sphere that you're investing in, obviously it's not just as simple as throwing money at a problem. I do think we have a lot of schools that are underfunded, but we have other schools that are adequately funded, but the conditions in which those schools are, like the neighborhoods are in and what's going on in society, the problems are so deep that it's impossible for just education to solve everything. And I think especially a lot of liberals think that education should be the panacea, invest in education, you'll help people. If kids are living in poverty, if they go into school hungry or whatever else, education's not going to give them everything they need to succeed. So sometimes we, I think, put too much weight on education. And of course, you could define education more broadly, which is the care of the flourishing of the young mind, whatever that is. Yeah, a lot of it starts early. Yeah, a lot of it starts with, so New York City at least, we do have universal pre-K. So from age three onward, you have the option for that. I mean, it's important for kids' socialization. Their parents are now able to know that they could go to work or do something else and have their kids taken care of. There's a lot of measures like that that we could do to equalize things. And again, for libertarians in the audience, some of this stuff is scary, because it's obviously more state involved, state involved in pre-K, state, it's already very involved in K through 12, more investment to state institutions like our state universities and in college. But for me, it's not a question of state versus non-state. It's a question of, you know, good outcomes for people. And it just happens to be that for working class people, having the collective power to elect representatives that will build a broader safety net is in their interest. For upper middle class people, for others, they could afford to pay for their own provisioning either directly or through like Obamacare-like schemes where you just get a subsidy and you pay the rest yourself and whatever. This is for really the bottom 40% plus of the population. They really don't have any options, so they prioritize other things and they end up with some sort of injury or health problem or whatever else. And it's bad for everyone in society, but it's especially bad for the people at the bottom of the labor market. So I saw various estimates for socialist programs like social security expansion, free college, Medicare for all will cost upwards of \$40 trillion over 10 years for zero. Okay, they argue with those numbers and so on. But so there's a cost. There's a taxpayer cost. What are given the weight of that cost? Can you still make the case with these programs? And then can you try to make the case against them that the cost is too high? So I will not argue with you on the numbers because you just threw out random numbers. I do think universal healthcare, if done right, can be basically cost neutral. I think it's an exception because we spend a tremendous amount of money on healthcare, a huge percentage, or GDP. So I think it could be done in a way that's close to cost neutral. So actually, can you argue on the numbers without arguing on the numbers? So you're saying just your gut says that there's a lot of, depending on how these programs are done, there's a lot of variance in how much it will actually cost. There's a lot of bureaucracy and billing right now in our healthcare sector. For example, there would be eliminated. There's a lot of costs that are spiraling upward of provider costs from both doctors, hospitals, but also pharmaceuticals to drug costs that insurance companies shoulder, because their market share is too fragmented to really negotiate hard. Medicare could sometimes negotiate better rates, but Medicare for all would negotiate even better rates. So I think there's a cost spiral that we can adjust with more government involvement.

And there's a reason why we spend a bigger share of our GDP on healthcare than other places. But let me just accept the broad premise that social programs cost money. Now, I think that one, for ordinary people, most of them, the trade off of even hypothetically if taxes on lower middle class and working class people in certain cases go up, the trade off would still be in their benefit, because they're the ones who currently, who would be consuming more of those goods, and also our tax system and whatnot is progressive. So the rich will pay more. The majority will consume more of them. Also, I think a lot of these programs are the bedrock of a healthy society. So one reason, for example, that we have so much crime and violence in the US, there's lots of cultural and other causes with our level of gun ownership, American history, and so on. But one really important factor is just the level of poverty and inequality in the US compared to other countries that combine with guns and other factors. So we live in more violent, unequal societies. A European would be shocked by the fact that in even some of our nicest areas and cities and elsewhere, there's not a real violence too. It's just normal to have gun violence. It's normal to have drug-related violence. We have, what, like 400 or 500 people some years in Baltimore, a city of under a million getting killed. These are all recipes for a society in which, one, the public sphere is shrunk like crazy because you're not going to go wander out for an evening stroll in a park if you live in a dangerous area or whatever else. The rot goes very deep and a welfare state is one way to live in a better society for everyone. There's been plenty of studies. There's one book called *The Spirit Level* on inequality that was quite popular that just notes that inequality is really terrible for the psyches of the rich too, not just for the poor. So I think spending some more money living in a more just society is doable. There's different ways to address certain costs, spirals. One reason why our welfare states are getting more and more expensive is in part just because our population is aging. But many of the same people say we can't afford more in our welfare states because we're already spending so much on social security and all these other entitlements are the same people. Also for one, closing borders so immigrants can't come in to help build the economy and to fill gaps in the economy and also who aren't for things that'll make it easier to have kids. I'm 33 years old. I have a lot of friends who have been putting them off having kids until they save up X amount of dollars even though they have someone they could raise children with because they can't afford the cost of childcare. Their job probably won't give them more than four or six weeks of family leave or whatever else. This is not the case in other countries. I think there's all sorts of benefits from having a bigger welfare state. But yes, there are costs and there are going to be certain trade-offs. It's not a magical thing where you could just have everything without trade-offs. In a progressive tax system, is there to push back on the costs here? Is there a point at which taxing the rich is kind of productive in the long term? In the short term, there might be a net benefit of increasing taxes because the programs, the middle class, the lower middle class gets is more beneficial. Is there a negative side to taxing the rich? In theory, yes. One would be if you tax the rich so much, they change their consumption patterns and that has negative impacts on the economy as a whole. You would have to kind of really model it out, but there would be a certain point in which the consumption changes might have net detrimental effects. I think that's more unlikely. The more likely scenario is you tax corporations and other wealthy people in society to the point that they have potentially less money for productive investment because you're in a capitalist society,

so you're reliant on capitalists to invest. You kind of don't want to be in the worst of both worlds where you've gone too far for capitalism but not far enough for socialism.

In my vision, of course, of socialism, that's one reason why we'd have to take the investment function away from capitalists. If you're going to make it so hard for them that they can't invest or they can't employ labor the way they're employing now, you have to create another mechanism for supply to be created. That's a transition point.

Yeah. What about longer term de-incentivizing young people that are dreaming of becoming entrepreneurs and realizing that there's this huge tax on being wealthy? If you take these big risks, which is what's required to be an entrepreneur and you are lucky enough to succeed and good enough to succeed, that the government will take most of your money away?

I think realistically, that's not a disincentive for most people. First of all, we already have a progressive taxation system. The government does take a bunch of the money away and people are still striving to become rich. A lot of what people want when they dream of success is they want accolades, they want respect, and of course they want some more wealth. Wealth, they consume luxury goods with or whatever else, but at a certain point, it becomes better for the state to tax and either redistribute directly or through social programs or redirect that money through tax credits and on other ways to shape investment towards productive investment. We don't want a society in which a bunch of rich people fly around in helicopters going from club to club while the productive economy does nothing. At that point, I think a lot of ordinary rich people might prefer the government to come in to tax them and to try to spur investment

in certain productive sectors. It really just depends, but I honestly believe that most people don't necessarily want to be rich for the sake of being rich. They want to be successful and there's many different dynamics to that. Accolades and social respect is an important one of them. It's also why people who just become filthy rich often, the first thing they do is start out filling trusts and try to give away their money because they want the social respect and accolades and whatever else, they don't want just their money.

On that topic, a little bit of a tangent. There's a lot of folks in the left community, far left community, socialist community that I think are at the source of a kind of derision towards the B word, the billionaires. Does it bother you or do you think that's in part justified a kind of using the word billionaire as a dirty word?

I think it's perfectly justified and that it's a populist shorthand.

So obviously, when I talk about inequality, I often talk about power dynamics between workers and bosses and so on. Billionaires, just the 99%, 1% version of it is just a populist shorthand to just explain the fact that there's a lot of people who have accumulated obscene wealth. These people aren't, in my mind, parasites in the kind of very, very old school socialist rhetoric in that, of course, capitalists provide employment, take entrepreneurial risks, come up with new ideas sometimes themselves, sometimes directly manage

work and whatever else. But they exert so much power over the lives of not just their workers with society as a whole. Taking away some of their wealth and power is a way to just empower others.

And again, these things have policy trade-offs. If you just snap your fingers and say, Elon Musk, you're now, all your wealth is gone, you're now on food stamps or whatever else in that

kind of arbitrary way, you'd be a totally disincentivized people from trusting the rules of the game as they've been set up in a capitalist society. And I think that would have negative consequences for workers. But saying that, hey, this person has too much power and too much wealth and has too much ability to dictate things about the lives of others, I think is just simply a fact. And I think it's true in the cases of people who are good people and have risen to this position, and it's true in the cases of people who are maybe not so good people and who have risen to these positions. So I agree with you in part, but I had to push back here. So one of the problems I see is using billionaires as a shorthand to talk about power inequality and wealth inequality, often dismisses the fact that some of these folks are some of the best members of our society. So outside of the, however the system is created inequalities, a young person today should dream to build cool stuff, not for the wealth, not for the power, the fame, but to be part of building cool stuff. Now there's a lot of examples of billionaires that have gotten there in shady ways and so on. And you can point that out. But in the same way, we celebrate great artists and great athletes and great literary icons and sort of writers and poets and musicians and engineers and scientists, we should sort of separate the human creator from the wealth that the system has given them. That's what I worry about, is like in our system, some of the greatest humans are the ones that have become rich. And so we sometimes mix up the, if you want to criticize the wealth, we sometimes criticize the human and the creator while that should actually be the person we aspire to be. So, you know, I would agree with that. LeBron James, if he's not already in his lifetime, will be a billionaire. And he got his money largely through just being an incredible athlete, excelling in his field more than anyone, besides for Michael Jordan, I think he's my number two. He might be my number one. I'm willing to keep keeping open mind about the LeBron versus Jordan conversation. But, you know, he got that through his merit and he's been rewarded. And a party's getting rewarded because he's created vast amounts of wealth beyond what he's getting. This is just his share. You know, it's the salary cap league. Whenever he's doing an endorsement, obviously that company is thinking that he's worth more than what they're paying him for that endorsement and so on. And to the extent with Elon Musk, people see innovation and they see someone who will put himself out there with sometimes crazy ideas because he's trying to think about the future and trying to just push things forward instead of just sitting on whatever money he has now and just investing it earning, you know, 6% return for the rest of his life. You know, I think that that's a positive thing. But I think it doesn't get to the broader policy question. When people invoke billionaires, they're invoking the specter of inequality and power. It's not normally the rhetoric that I use because I propose and I use more traditional socialist rhetoric and terms. But I think it gets at something real. So often with these sorts of shorthands we use in politics, they're imperfect, but they speak to a real thing. And they feed a little bit of fun that folks like AOC and Elon have with each other. It feeds, it inspires, it serves as a catalyst for productive discourse. Okay, speaking of which, you said you're a fan of Bernie Sanders. Would you classify yourself as a Bernie bro? What's the technical definition of a Bernie bro? Is that it's a subset? No, no, no. I'm sorry. You're a sophisticated philosopher, writer, economic and political thinker. Of course, you would not call yourself a Bernie bro. I'm fine with calling myself a Bernie bro. Because it was made up by liberal journalists to smear Bernie and his supporters during the 2016 campaign, even though

disproportionately his supporters were young women in their 20s. But whatever, I think I ride for Bernie. There's the worst things in the world being called a bro. So that's fine. What do you like about Bernie Sanders? And to what degree does he represent his ideas of socialism? To what degree does he represent the more traditional sort of liberal ideas? I love Bernie. Most of all, I like his clarity. He's by far the best communicator we have on the left. He speaks with a moral force. He's relatable. And he has taken a lot of socialist rhetoric from academia and brought it down to its core in a way that's comprehensible for ordinary people and speaks to their daily lives. So when Bernie does a speech, people can finish his lines because they know what he's going to say. They know what points he's going to hit because socialism, in my mind, should not be a complicated thing. Now, when we get to more abstract discussions about what a future system would look like, when we get to the policy trade-offs today, I think we need to put on a different hat. We should embrace all sorts of nuance and contradiction and complication. When it comes to the core moral and ethical appeal, I think Bernie grasps that and how to communicate it. Now, Bernie Sanders was politicized a very long time ago. I actually once told him, I've only met him a few times, but one time I joked that in his book, he mentioned that one politicizing moment in his life was when the Brooklyn Dodgers left town. And he was devastated because he was a Dodgers fan from Brooklyn. And I said, this is like 2020 campaign. This is maybe 2019. I said, Bernie, you're running for president. You do not need to keep reminding people of your age. But he was politicized through the Young People Socials League, which was an old offshoot of the Norm Thomas Socialist Party of America. So very old school socialist tradition. Then he was engaged in labor struggles in the 60s. He was engaged in the civil rights movement. So he came from this old left generation that I think just had a more plain spoken, more rooted way of understanding change and socialism. It wasn't, in my mind, polluted by academia and by some of the turn towards issues of culture and excessive focus on representation or whatever else. It was really rooted in something economic in a way. Then obviously he had all his ideas and he was also a product of the left and that he went to Vermont. He kind of did the back to the land thing. He was basically like a, not quite a hippie and an affect, but he was out there trying to farm or whatever and, you know, cold as hell, northern Vermont. And then he decided to do politics, do electoral politics. And he failed for a long time. He did third party politics. He kept losing races. Eventually he became by savvy and luck and things he learned, the mayor of Burlington, Vermont. And he just kept with the same message. In my book, I talk about, I quote, I think a Bernie speech from the 1970s, one of his early campaigns. And I compared it to a Bernie speech during his 2016 campaign. It was virtually identical. Millionaires was swapped with millionaires and billionaires, speaking of billionaires, which is beautiful. I think there's something great to what he offered American politics. And also all around the world, there's a socialist poll in politics, whether you agree with it or not. And all these countries in Europe and any rich country, Japan and so on. And the US really didn't have that. The furthest left you could go was Chris Hayes and MSNBC or whatever. I'm very glad that there's a social poll. And I think we have Bernie to thank for it, to the extent that a lot of self-described socialists don't think Bernie is a real socialist. It's in part because he stays grounded in people's day-to-day lives and struggles. I don't think he thinks often the way that I do and other people

more disconnected or step-and-move from day-to-day politics, think about the future contours of a social society and so on. But I think he's morally committed to a egalitarian different sort of future. And I don't think he, at least I haven't heard him talk about this big, broad history and future. So the Marxist ideology and so on. Not that he's afraid of or something. It's just not how he thinks about it. Yeah, I think he's a practical thinker. And also, yeah, he is running, even if he should be afraid of it too, because he is a major politician running for president. I think what people want is they want the left wing of the possible, and at least the segment of the party that was voting for him, the Democratic Party is voting for him. They wanted something that was a step or two removed from what they had now and was visionary, but not so far removed that it seemed like a scary leap. And I think we lost a chance in 2016 to someone that I think would have beaten Trump, or at the very least would have been close. Do you think the Democrats screwed him over? Yes, not in the way of deliberate or direct vote-making, but they put their thumb on the scale for sure. It's not even conspiracy theory. There's all this stuff in the debates about Clinton's people being fed questions and whatever else, and just the tone of the media. The media was extremely dismissive and hostile to him. I love that Bernie still does the Fox News town hall, because they're just him speaking to the people, and he's not afraid of going on any sort of outlet and making his case. But I think a lot of the liberal media in particular always had it out for Bernie Sanders. Because that was really annoying. That was really annoying, how dismissive they were. I've seen that in some other candidates. They were dismissive towards Andrew Yang in that same way. So forget the ideology. Why are they so smug sometimes towards certain candidates? What is that? Because I think that's actually at the core to a degree if Democrats or any party fails, that it's that smugness. Because people see through that. I think a lot of these people are friends, even if they don't know each other, they're friends because they went to the same schools. They know the same people. They have the same broad ideology and worldview. So they had a sense of what the Democratic Party should be, and who it should be running, and who is going to win, and also what was serious and on-serious. Yeah. So Bernie would say some things about the world that objectively tell a lot of people seem correct, or at least pretty close to correct. And a journalist would just look at him like he's from outer space. To some extent, this also happens to people on the right. People on the right often say things that I find repulsive or just wrong. But there's parts of the media that would describe their certain views as illegitimate or outside the boundaries of acceptable conversation. I think there should be a few things outside the boundary of acceptable conversation, hate speech, and so on. But there's this attempt to say their views are illegitimate, and therefore anyone who votes for them for any reason is illegitimate too. And that's one reason why I think it's fueled a lot of resentment, and it will ultimately end up fueling the extremes of American politics that people feel like they're not being listened to. And some of it is also style of speaking and personality, where if you're not willing to play a game of civility, there's a proper way of speaking if you're a Democrat. If you're not doing that kind of proper way of speaking, people dismiss you. I think in a certain sense, whatever you feel about him, people dismiss Donald Trump for the same reason, where it's the style of speaking, the personality of the person, that he's not playing by the rules of polite society, of polite politician society, and so on. And that's really, that troubles me because it feels like solutions, the great leaders will not be polite in the way they're not, they're not going to behave in the

way they're supposed to behave. And I just wish the media was at least open-minded to that, like, which I guess gives me hope about the new media, which is like more distributed citizen media, right, that they're more open-minded to the revolutionary, to the outsiders, right? I actually first, I really like Bernie Sanders. I first heard him in conversation with Tom Hartman. He had these like, like weekly conversations, and just the authenticity from the guy. I didn't even know any context. I didn't even know, honestly, he was a Democratic socialist or anything. The authenticity of the human being was really refreshing. And when he, I guess, decided to run for president, that was really strange. I was like, surely this kind of, this person has no chance. Just like, he seemed too authentic. He seemed to, like, he's not going to be effective at playing the game of politics. So it was very inspiring to me to see that you don't necessarily need to be good at playing the game of politics. You can actually have a chance of winning. Yeah, that was, that was really inspiring to see. What about some of the other popular candidates? What do you think

about AOC? I don't know if she self-identifies as a socialist or not. She does self-identify as a Democratic socialist. I think she was a very inspiring figure for a lot of people. She was kind of out of this Bernie wave of the first set of Bernie candidates in 2018 that identified with him instead of the Democratic Party establishment. I think that she's still developing as a politician. And it's very difficult when you're in a deep blue district and when you don't often have to worry about reelection or talk to, but modulate your rhetoric to win over swing voters in your district, but then you're immediately a national and cultural figure. So AOC basically goes from her views, which are compelling in my mind. A lot of her programmatic views are compelling, wins her district, and then has her on rhetoric, which to me compared to Bernie owes itself more to the academic left and the way that a lot of the left has learned to talk. I don't mean academic in the sense that she's like a Marxist or whatever else, but academic in the way that she may be using at times like confusing language to convey basic points when she gets into like the language of intersectionality and whatever else. Especially in the context of cultural issues and stuff like that. Exactly. Instead of just the plain spoken Bernie, like, yeah, discrimination is wrong. If you ask me about a cultural issue, I'll come down on the same side as AOC. I'm sure nine plus times out of 10, but I'll try to root it into just basic, like, yeah, treat people with respect, and they'll treat you with respect, and that's the way we should govern our civic sphere. We don't need to talk about intersectionality to I think get that. So there's that rhetoric, but she's not just regular congressperson in a deep blue district. She's also a national and international cultural and political figure, so she's now a spokesperson because of large like a media event of her surprising upset election and her being young and like being really connected to this post Bernie moment. And I think amid these constant one attacks on her from the right, and also this media attention, and this notoriety, she hasn't really modulated or adjusted her audience, her rhetoric and how do you win over someone who really hates a lot of your ideas, but might actually believe in some of your policies. And I think she's been ineffective, quite frankly, in the last year, making that transition. Whereas I think other politicians who are not so far left who don't identify as socialists, let's say that John Fetterman has managed to become more effective. And I don't think it's a question of character or whatever else. And I like AOC. So I don't want to put it so harshly. But I think a lot of it has to do with her being a congressperson in a quote unquote purple state. But at her best, she does it,

but it's like glimmers. It's kind of like, I don't know, what sport are you biggest fan of? I'll give you a sports analogy. I mean, NFL is up there, soccer is up there, but probably UFC. Okay, well, I can't give you a good analogy for any of those, but it's like a raw prospect. Like, you know, someone who shows glimmers of hope, so they were drafted really high and they bounce from team to team. You're like, I'm clinging on to my AOC stock, but I think that she needs to be self critical enough and her team needs to be self critical enough to know that the goal is not merely to be a national cultural figure and win a reelection near a deep blue district. The goal has to be to become truly a national political figure, which will require changes. A unifier and inspiring figure about the ideas that she represents. Definitely. And she has other things against her, like obviously class focus, but there's no denying, I think that some of the hostility to her is like sexism. It's rooted in, I think people wanting to see her fail or whatever else, but that's only some of it. I think some of it otherwise is her struggling to relate to people who don't have a lot of her starting points as far as moral and ethical beliefs. Yeah, but she's actually great at flourishing in all the attacks she's getting. She's doing a good job of that. A lot of those attacks will break me if I'm being honest. Yes. The amount of fire she's under, but you don't want that to become a drug to where you just get good at being a national figure that's constantly in the fights and are using that for attention and so on. You still want to be the unifier. And that's the tricky, tricky switch. Do you think there's a chance there's a world in which she's able to modulate it enough to be a unifier and run for president and win? I think she's very far away from being able to do that. I think that even other politicians that are also polarizing within the squad in terms of what they say or their ideas or whatever else are very effective communicators like Ilhan Omar and others, I think AOC, I mean, that's my hope. My hope is that someone like AOC could. The last year plus has not been extremely promising in my mind in part because she's become or she's continued to position herself as a lightning rod cultural figure. Whereas I think a national political figure needs to pick their spots and also pick their moment for changing their rhetoric and adjusting to their audience. And I think she does it in certain environments, but that needs to be your national message when you're out there. You need to be speaking towards the not already converted. And I think Bernie does that. Bernie strips his politics down to the basics. So I agree with you spiritually, but we also have an example of Donald Trump winning the presidency. Isn't some of the game of politics that's separate from the policy being able to engage in rhetoric that leads to outrage and then walking through that fire with grace? First of all, I think Trump is kind of a unique personality in American history. So it's hard to compare anyone to Trump. But don't you think AOC is comparable in terms of the uniqueness in the political system we're in or no? I think Trump is much more of a fire brand anti-establishment force. And I mean this negatively for what is worth because I disagree with Trump, but he was willing to set fire to the Republican establishment. He was able to self-fund largely his campaign and he already was a media figure without them. AOC has been much more cautious with the Democratic Party establishment in part because she's not trying to run a national political campaign right now for the outside. Like a 5% chance they're going to be president. Let me set fire to everything. She's trying to help people and help her constituents through the game of getting committee appointments and getting wins on the margins. And I think that's understandable for what it's worth. But in the process, I think what's the difference between AOC and a progressive Democrat? During 2016, it used to be

pretty easy to say the difference between the Bernie Crats and a progressive Democrat because we were establishing our own outside third force in American politics where you could knock on the door of a lot of people who would end up voting for Trump and they would say, oh, I have a lot of respect for Bernie or whatever. They're still going to not vote for him. But he wasn't considered part of the Democratic Party milieu. I think now with AOC, there's a much closer association of AOC in our policies with ordinary Democrats where she needs to draw stronger distinctions. She doesn't need to do it like Trump did with just man, I forgot all of them, though I found some of them amusing in the moment, like all his nicknames about lion, Ted Cruz, and then the rest. But I do feel like she needs to differentiate herself a bit more, but then also just keep her language simple. Trump was more complex than Bernie in his literal language, but he was repetitive and there was kind of a rhythm and a cadence to Trump's speech. I think AOC needs to like Bernie reduce her rhetoric

down to a couple key lines and signatures and focus her politics not on 20 issues, but on three or four most important issues and have that message just one.

Bernie will do an interview with you and he'll write down, I hope you do interview Bernie, but he'll write down like five things and I'm only going to talk about these five things.

Yeah, ask me about this. Okay, I'm talking about these five things.

So that's a message discipline that Bernie has been exemplary on, yeah, for sure.

But I think that's learned, that could be developed.

I think she could develop it. Listen, I hope, I'm answering your question,

I think not the way I should answer it, being someone broadcasting to people on the left and elsewhere. I hope AOC goes in that direction. I just think that she has a lot going against her just because she's already a national figure and she's in a deeper blue district. But we need to root our politics then in working class people and a lot of districts that, I don't know, the type of kitchen table conversations are, I hate that cliché, but I just used it, but a lot of these conversations are just different in their tone and cadence. And it's not just a question of, Federman or Tim Ryan in Ohio and kind of just white working class voters. I mean, working class voters of any race, their day to day needs and the day to day things they want to talk about is just at a different plane than a Met Gala cultural statement.

Yeah. I mean, it's clear that you respect and love her and would like to see different ways. I mean, she's young, so the different trajectories that she could develop that would ultimately make her a good candidate. I'm just looking at odds here for, and I disagree with them. I'm buying AOC stock here, given these odds. So in terms of Democratic, who's going to win the 2024 election? So that includes running and winning on the Democrat side is 18% chance for Biden. So 7% chance for Kamala Harris, Gavin Newsom at 6%, Michelle Obama at 3%, Hillary Clinton

at 2%, and AOC at 1.5%. And then Bernie at 1%. So I would not buy AOC at that mark. I would buy Biden like crazy though. I'm not a gambling man, but I would totally toss a G at Biden at that amount. AOC at 1.5% chance? I think it's, I don't think she runs. You don't think she runs yet? Okay. I don't think Bernie will primary Biden either. I mean, if Biden doesn't run, then obviously, it's an open field, but I just feel like. Do you think Biden runs? Yes, I think Biden probably runs. Oh, boy. He's an incumbent president. So it's just, it's very hard to imagine another Democrat being able to do better than him. All right. What about the competition?

I think Donald Trump is the best thing for the Democrats period, just because it would create this turnout mechanism, this excitement around, we have to stop Donald Trump. He's attacking DeSantis. I mean, already he's trying to, you know, the desentimonious thing, but yeah. Trump's kind of like the Don King of American politics. Yeah. It's interesting what kind of dynamic chaos he's created. It probably led to more people being interested in politics. Well, almost guaranteed it led to more people being interested in politics, but maybe not in a healthy way. Maybe it created an unhealthy relationship with politics where it created more partisanship. For me, I don't have a problem with partisanship. It's what kind of partisanship. So I think Trump has cultivated a lot of right populace, a relationship with his supporters. It's almost like a leader, follower relationship in a way that doesn't actually enhance people's knowledge of politics and the issues, but actually just leads them to follow the party line. Ideally, I think socialist politics and politics on the left should be something different. Eugene Debs, the great American and socialist leader of the late 19th and early 20th century, used to say, you know, I'm not your Moses. I can't promise to lead you to the promised land because if I can lead you there and you just follow me there, someone's just going to lead you straight out as soon as I'm gone. And I think there's something nice about that kind of anti, you know, blind following leader, follower kind of dynamic on the left at its best. That said, in the way the, at least the political race in the United States has turned out, it seems like it's turned into a bit of entertainment and there having personalities and characters is really important. So in terms of policy and actual leadership, yes, maybe having a leader, like an authoritarian big leader is not good, but maybe for the race it is, for the drama of it. You just want to have drama and attention on people who are actually going to turn out to be good leaders. That's a weird balance to strike. Earned media is what they always talk about, right? And political campaigns, like, you know, the more you could get on TV, the better. Even like, I really like Federman, he just won his campaign, but a good part of his early campaign, he had pivoted from talking about issues to just talking about Dr. Oz living in New Jersey and kind of having the troll campaign against him, which I found amusing. But also, and it was effective, obviously won. But, you know, it's a bit depressing because I would rather have a whole campaign cycle about healthcare and jobs and other issues. Yeah. And the hope is that people just get better at that kind of social media communication. So I do actually think there's something about doing political speeches that makes you sound less authentic because you have to, like, do so many of them. It must be exhausting to, like, day after day after day, make the speech. You're going to start sort of replaying the same stuff over and over as opposed to actually thinking about the words that are coming out of your mouth. And then the public will know that you're not really being that authentic. Even though you believe those things, you just, it's just tough. I just wish they didn't have to do constantly do speeches. So I think that the fact that Bernie's speeches very clearly, like, came out of, if not directly his own pen, but his own rhetoric over the years, and he kind of wrote it seemed authentic. Yes. Even if he was repeating it. And then Trump has just wild improvisation. I think people found real, you know, in a certain way. And I would love for the left more generally to tap into some of that anti-establishment sentiment. But obviously, due in a way that's productive, that doesn't blame immigrants or whatever else for problems. But, you know,

it's kind of built on a different basis. But people are fed up for good reason with a lot of conventional politics. And we need to speak to that. Otherwise, it'll only be the right that is taking advantage of those people's anger. Well, I almost forgot to ask you about China. So both historically, we talked about the Soviet Union. But what lessons do you draw from the implementation of socialism, communism in Maoist China and modern China? What's the good and the bad? Well, I think it's very similar to the Soviet case. And that socialism came to China through not a base of organized workers in a capitalist country to a certain level development and so on. But it came through the countryside and in conditions of civil war, strife, you have Japanese invasion and whatever else. And Mao built his base in the peasantry, then came down to the city to govern and try to build a base and rule over workers. So it's kind of an inversion of classic socialist theory. Now, the same thing that I said before about Stalin and assessing the Soviet Union has to apply here. Because obviously, I oppose authoritarianism and all sorts of moral condemnations I should do. But to look at what the Chinese Communist Party actually accomplished, I think we kind of need to take a step backwards from our moral opposition to the means in which they accomplished it and just look at it developmentally. China benefited greatly from the Communist Party's implementation of basic education and health care. So in a lot of China, you had one of the conditions women were absolutely terrible. They were still foot binding and all sorts of like terrible backward practice. You had a huge vast majority of the population that was illiterate without any access to basic education and you had no health access, especially on the countryside. So those are the three good things that China did, improve the status of women, get everyone into primary education and improve the lot of health care. Besides that, their agricultural campaign was a failure just like Stalin's for many of the same reasons I mentioned before. The great leap forward and crash industrialization didn't really work either. In a way, is China better than India or other countries that didn't have the basic education and the strong state authority and the health improvements and whatever. I think maybe, but I think that's why we need to sometimes go beyond just economic measures of success. Because if you told me tomorrow, the US will grow at 3% if we maintain democracy, but it'll grow at 8%, 9%. Everyone will be wealthier if we move to some sort of authoritarian government. I think you're asking the wrong question if we're going to make your decision based on growth because it has to be based on some sort of principle. But the same dynamic of from the beginning, the Chinese Communist Party ruling over people emerging from the outside through armed conflicts and ruling over ordinary Chinese people have continued. Since then, the policies have been better economically and often at times, not always, the technocratic governance has been quite good. But that doesn't mean that the party has a democratic mandate or should have the right to govern as they see fit. Because clearly, it doesn't have that mandate in swaths of the country or in places like Hong Kong or elsewhere. But to me, nothing the Chinese Communist Party does has anything to do with socialism. I think even by their own definition today, it really doesn't. It's a sort of nationalist, authoritarian developmental state that has done some good things to improve the living standards of the Chinese people, other things that were counterproductive. And as a democratic socialist, I certainly don't support that state. But I also hope that the US and Biden will find a way to avoid intense rivalry and competition economically spilling over into something worse.

From a democratic socialist perspective, what's one policy or one or two ways you could fix if you could fix China? If you took over China, what would you like to see change?

Well, the democratic part becomes before the socialist part. So I would say there needs to be multi-party elections in China. And state censorship and control over the press, in other words, needs to be done with. As far as their immediate economic policy, I think the idea of maintaining strong state control of certain commanding heights of the economy while liberalizing other spheres has done quite well in China's case, lifting people out of poverty. But again, there's something really lost in society, even if it's getting wealthier, if ordinary people don't have the ability to participate in dissent freely. And the Chinese authorities have allowed some. It's not North Korea. It's not a totally totalitarian state. There's been workplace protests. There have been all sorts of local anti-corruption protests and things like that. But the government decides what's permitted and what's not at what particular moment. And I think the long run, even if it can survive, there's a better way to do things, which is quite simply a democracy. The thing is, though, the lessons of history that China is looking at, this is a dark aspect. So building on top of the fact that it seems like under Stalin and under Mao, under Stalin, the Soviet Union, and under Mao, China has seen a lot of economic growth. And then one dark aspect

of that, while under the Great Leap Forward, upwards of 70 million people dead. Today, I think there's a large number of people who admire Stalin and admire Mao.

What they admire is the stability and the strong leadership. And there's a lot of people who miss the Soviet Union. The reason why they miss it is that it was a system they knew that provided the basics of their livelihood. Then afterwards, look at Russia in the 90s, people were in chaos.

The Communist Party had a huge amount of support, democratically. Anti-democratic measures had to

be taken ironically against the Communist Party to keep it from regaining more of a foothold in Russia. But we don't need that trade-off. We could have a form of... Imagine if Russia went to a system closer to social democracy that maintained the stability that people wanted, the welfare state that people wanted, but restructured the economy in not a shock way, but in a way that made sense and that ordinary people felt ownership of instead of just oligarchs who were a former Communist Party bureaucracy just dividing up the country for themselves. I think the same thing in China. First of all, certainly from the West, the US government and people in the US have no say over what should happen in China. The Chinese Communist Party has more authentic authority

than any of us do in the country. But I think that the fears and stability that a lot of Chinese people have, why I would imagine that even in a democratic election, the Communist Party might have majority support is because they fear the unknown. They fear collapse. That was one of the big lessons of the Soviet collapse. Do you want China divided into five, six states? Do you want economic turmoil? Do you want mass immediate privatization? Do you want whatever welfare state you have destroyed and so on? I think people are right to have those fears, but there's a different route towards democratization that maintains stability. There's different routes that you could have democracy. Not every country had to go down the route of Yugoslavia and the USSR and so on. You are the founder of the magazine Jacobin, of which I am a subscriber.

I recommend everybody subscribe whether you're on the left or the right. The magazine does tend to lean left. Does it officially say it's socialist? We're a socialist publication. We try to be

interested. We try to have articles that have debates and contestation and whatever else, but we're definitely, we're all socialists. Well, it's a lot of really interesting articles, so I definitely recommend that people subscribe, support. The product of the 21st century only subscribed to the digital version, but I guess there's also paper version. Yeah, there's like 70,000 subscribers in print. Does it come on a scroll? I don't even know. Do they even publish paper then? I'm going to mail you a bunch of copies. It's perfect bound. It's long issues. Our Jackman's publisher, we're making it for, recently did a redesign of the publication, so it looks really good. It's up there in the design award competition range. Nice. It's sexy. I can show it off to all my friends. Put it in your coffee table. You don't even have to read it. First, I need to get a coffee table, but yes, I'll get both. That's what a respectable adult, listen, I've upgraded my life. I haven't had a couch, I don't think ever. So I got a couch recently because somebody told me that serious adults have a couch. And they also got a TV because serious adults have a couch and a TV. And as you see, it's been here for many months and I still haven't like unboxed it. So I'm trying to learn how to be an adult looking up on YouTube, how to be an adult and learning slowly. After that, I'll look into this whole leisure thing. Anyway, what's the origin of Jackman? What was the idea? What was the mission and what's the origin story? So I started Jackman when I was between my sophomore and junior year of college. Basically, I was already a socialist. I was involved in the Democratic Socialist of America. I was in the youth section, the young Democratic Socialist. I was editing their kind of youth online magazine called The Activist back then. And to be honest, I had my ideology, I had my views. I had a group of people around me that we would debate together and occasionally write for this other publication, The Activist and so on. And yeah, just a product of creative ignorance in the sense that I knew I had the capacity to maybe pull off an issue or two. I just had no idea how long I would keep doing it, you know, and I'd just eventually consume my life slowly but surely. I had different plans for my future kind of, you know, but I ended up just being a magazine publisher. I literally didn't know what a magazine publisher was, but it just kind of happened. What's the hardest part about running a magazine? Well, the hardest part is obviously the things just like any enterprise, right? The things beyond your control, like you could put out something that you think is great or interesting, but then you need the feedback of people actually subscribing to it and you occasionally encounter periods where you feel like you're doing your best work but you're not getting the audience response. And I think you just need the kind of the self-confidence to just keep doing it. And obviously, if you're totally obscure and crazy and way off the mark, you're never going to build that audience. But I think a lot of publications have tried to, same thing I guess goes with YouTube shows, whatever else, they try to adapt to what everyone else is doing right away when they don't achieve success. Whereas for me, the early issues that Jackman got very little resonance and it took a while for it to build into something, but a lot of it was just the confidence to just keep going and keep publishing what I would want to read and just hope that I'm not so much of a weirdo, that I'm the only one. Is there some pressure that you could speak to of audience capture? Because it is a socialist publication. You have a fan base, a readership base. Is there times you feel pressured not to say a certain thing, not to call out bullshit, not to criticize certain candidates, all that kind of stuff? Yes, definitely, of course. I myself am looser on the self-censorship than other people,

but that's only because I've gotten this far just shooting for the hip or whatever. Occasionally, you'll come to a rash judgment. You'll speak too soon or complain about something too soon, and you'll have to either apologize or reconsider or whatever else. But on a host of issues, I have views that maybe not all of the left has, but I know that the core of my politics is a politics against oppression, against exploitation, against all the things that we talked about. And if you know that's at the core of your politics, then you could maybe say, you know what, I don't think the left should respond to the real racism that's still around in the world by adopting an excessively racialized rhetoric, if that makes sense. I fundamentally just am a universalist, and I believe that people, no matter where their backgrounds are and so on, kind of want the same things for themselves and for their families. And I feel like a lot of the left or some of the left, not even the far left, more like the center left, has adopted kind of a stance saying, oh, we need to talk about white privilege or white Karens or white guys or old white guys doing this or whatever else. And to me, it's not only wrong in a moral sense, but it's counterproductive. Because the last thing I want is a young white teenager who feels unrepresented politically and wants to be a part of maybe even the left to feel like, oh, I should think more about my identity. No, the whole point of anti-racist politics is that we want to live in a world where me and you can go around the corner and get a bear and we're not people of two different races getting a bear. We're just two guys in America getting a bear. We're trying to have the type of society in which there's less of that sort of communal or racialized identity. And that was a whole point of a whole generation of anti-racist struggle, but now we seem to be kind of reifying it in the media and in culture and in politics. And that's one issue where I've been kind of banging the drum on this to the point that it's annoying in certain parts of the left. I don't think there's maybe extreme opposition among socialists, but it's more like, why do you keep focusing on this? Let's focus on our real enemy, the right, instead of criticizing this part of... No, I think it's really... I'm really glad you exist. I'm really glad you're beating that drum because I think that's one of the reasons that the left has not had a broader impact or is not heard by more people that could hear its message is because the othering of... As if there's two teams, as if it's black and white, as opposed to having... There's a common humanity and a common struggle amongst all of us. You also wrote the book that we mentioned a few times, *The Socialist Manifesto*, *The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*. What's the framework, what are the key ideas of the book? A lot of it's a look at socialism's past, present and future, basically. A lot of it is historical. The opening chapter uses a pasta sauce factory as a way to explain certain Marxist concepts, but also a theory of change, like how we get from, let's say, pure capitalism to more regulated unionized and social democratic systems, then beyond social democracy into my vision of socialism. That's kind of the first little bit. It's like a visionary look at the future of socialism, but then I try to explain why some of the past social movements have gone wrong because I think we can't take for granted. I think a lot of people want to live in a different or better society, but they look at past examples and they're skeptical. I think there's good reason for skepticism. I try to explain both the successes of certain systems like social democracy, but also what happened in Russia, China, and more of a historical overview. Then the book ends in the present. It ends with looking at the Bernie Sanders campaign, why it resonated, looking at some of the problems facing the US, the UK, other advanced economies, and why I think the socialist message is still relevant.

Because for the longest time, I'm 33, I became a socialist as a teenager. For the longest time, it seemed like I was just a member of a historical society, keeping alive an idea that nobody was interested in anymore. Now it's heartening to see more young people interested in the idea, but we actually need to, I think, have a clearer sense of what we stand for and how we make our movement, like it used to be, more rooted in the working class. If anyone rewinds the tape, they go to when we first started talking about early socialism, when I was talking about the German social democratic workers movement, or all these different early parties. I think at various points, I use the word worker and socialist movement interchangeably, because in fact, at the time, it was pretty interchangeable. Socialism was the ideology that had the appeal of the working class movement. You couldn't really separate between the two. Now, obviously, socialism is like a fringe ideological concurrent among a very small minority of the working class, which is fine, but we need to get to the point, I think, ideally, where when people talk about unions and people protesting in social movements and socialism, they all are one and the same as part of the same broad movement. How did you become a socialist? What was the personal story or the idea that took hold in your mind? I'm the youngest of five. I was the only one of my family born in the United States. It was very obvious to me that my life outcomes were very different than life outcomes of my siblings. My three oldest siblings didn't go to college after high school. Some of them got their degrees much later on as adults, but I was, from a pretty young age, had access to a great public school district and was put on the track to go to college. This is the outcome. Like I said, even my grandmother was illiterate. My mom didn't have a lot of educational opportunities early in her life. She actually graduated from college the same year I did, so she later got her degrees and whatever else. But to me, it was obvious that so much of my life outcomes weren't just a product of hard work or my family's sacrifices because, of course, I had the same family as my siblings, but the product of state institutions helping out, evening things out, public school district, public library, all sorts of after-school programs, all that was the domain of the state and I really benefited from it. In essence, my core was the social democratic belief the state should. We distribute a bit, build public institutions, be an equalizer. Now, how it became a Marxist and a socialist was much more random. I was just intellectually interested in it and eventually I merged the two together, where I merged together my more pragmatic and practical interest and day-to-day concerns and reforms and so on with my loftier intellectual interests and Marxism into the politics I have today, which I try to balance and do both. I think a lot of socialists in the organization that I joined as a teenager, the Democratic Socialists of America and elsewhere, try to do the two, try to maintain some sort of balanced dream here and our vision of the future. What do you think Marx would say if he were to read your book, *Socialist Manifesto*, do a review? So, I think Marx would say that my vision of a Socialism after capitalism maintains key elements of what he would, the commodity form. So, a lot of what Marx was concerned about was what markets do to human relationships in a negative sense. His early writings especially focus a lot on the alienation of labor. My vision of Socialism, at least in the near term, a lot of that is about decodifying certain sectors. So, reducing the market in certain sectors and reducing alienation, but not eliminating it. It is about eliminating exploitation and oppression. So, knowing Marx and knowing how critical he was of certain other Socialist strands and tendencies, and he would often write very snarky notes and letters to

people like Engels being like, this guy LaSalle, he's a total asshole. Then he would send a separate note to LaSalle saying, hey, can I borrow five grand? This is actually true. He did the boat. He did the boat, I think the same month. So, he would be really good at Twitter is what you say. Oh, he would be the best at Twitter. And also, he was a journalist before with his work for the New York Tribune. He was very clever, very snarky. He would be awesome at Twitter. I think him and Elon would have good back and forwards. But I think it would be critical to some parts, but I think the strangest part for him would be reading the historical sections and seeing the way in which his ideas, which is fundamentally ideas about human emancipation, were used for evil, for hardship, in ways that did the opposite of emancipated, but in some cases, enslaved people. And I think he would have definitely not want to be associated with them. He probably would rather be associated with me than them, but even then, only begrudgingly.

What advice would you give to young folks in high school, in college, how to have a career they can be proud of or how to change the world? I think be intellectually curious. Read outside your current beliefs and understand and read authors on their own terms. So the worst thing in the world to do is to read anything, especially work of fiction, but anything, and try to deduce the authors' backgrounds or politics, whatever else. Read it on its own terms first, then you could reread it and do other examinations or whatever else. And also read a lot of history. So I started off reading books like Eric Hoppe's bombs, four books on history, going from the 1700s all the way to 1994, the last book is The Age of Extremes. But I think understanding history gives you a bird's eye view of everything, sociology, economics, everything. So these big sweeping historical books are really useful to know. Everybody should know basically what year or at least what decade. Serfdom was abolished, what decade, slavery was abolished, what century Magna Carta was, when the Roman Empire fell. That's debated when the Roman Empire fell. All these, I think, being a person with a general knowledge and general sense of history and whatever else just makes you more eclectic and interesting. And it's way better than just, especially a lot of my Indian friends, not just Indians, but the hyper focus on, you got to specialize and you got to focus on math or engineering, whatever you want to do. You just know your field really well, but nothing else. I think there's something really too, whether you're getting at school or you're just going to do it by yourself, giving yourself a liberal arts education. I think there's a lot of power to having the facts of history in terms of in time, when stuff happened, but also really powerful is knowing spatially, like the geography. There were a point on the map and there's interesting dynamics that happened throughout history of all the different nations in Europe, of all the different military conflicts and the expansions and the wars and the empires and all that kind of stuff. It really puts into context how human history has led to the place we are today, because all the different geopolitical conflicts we have today, even the politics of the day is grounded in history, maybe less so for the United States, because it has a very young history, but that history, even for the United States is still there, right, from the civil war. And understanding that gives you context to when you tweet random stuff about this or that person or politician and so on. Yeah, very true. Very true. One of the regrets I have currently is I have perhaps been too focused on the 20th century in terms of history, the present and the 20th century. A lot of people write to me that there's a lot of lessons to be learned in ancient history as well. So not just even American history, but just looking farther and farther and farther back. Yeah, that feels like it's another time, it's another place. It totally has no lessons, but then you remind yourself that it's the same

human beings, right? Yeah, and also we're no smarter than them. We just have more crude knowledge in part because of them, but they were just as clever as us. What do you think is the meaning of this whole experiment we have going on on Earth? What's the meaning of life? Well, I think there's no broad meaning of life. There's, it was an accident, but we ourselves needed to make our own meaning. And for me, a lot of it is about posterity, trying to do something worthwhile while on Earth, but also leaving something behind. It could just be relationships with friends or family in the future, maybe having a family and kind of like leaving behind that sort of legacy, like little bits of yourself, but also them being able to learn the same way I have little bits of my parents and my grandparents in me. And then also, I think in a social sense, zooming out from just the individual on the family, leaving the world behind a little better. I would love to be a part of a movement that created a world with a little bit less suffering, a little bit less oppression or exploitation or whatever else. That's really why I'm a socialist. It's not about snapping your fingers and curing the world of everything in one go, but it is about, I think, giving our lives some sort of meaning and purpose. And you don't have to be a socialist to do that. You could just do it at the micro level in your own day-to-day interactions, but I just feel like life has no good meaning without thinking of posterity in the future. And I have to say thank you for doing so. Thank you for caring about the struggle of the people in the world through ideas that are bold and I think challenging for a lot of people. In a time when socialism is something that can be attacked aggressively by large numbers of people, still persevering and still exploring those ideas and seeing what of those ideas can make for a better world that's beautiful to see. Bhaskar, thank you so much for talking today. Thank you for all the work you do. I can't wait to see what you do next. I appreciate it. And yeah, thanks for keeping an open mind with these conversations and to your audience too. It's nice to have a space where people can debate and think at length and don't have to worry about sound bite culture. Thank you, brother. Thank you for listening to this conversation with Bhaskar Sunkara. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now let me leave you with some words from Karl Marx. Democracy is the road to socialism. Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.