

Jonathan Kay vs. David McNally on capitalism, communism, and what Michael Moore has to say about America

Monday 19 October 2009, by [KAY Jonathan](#), [McNALLY David](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2009).

As part of the National Post's weekly Arts&Life "popcorn panel" feature, pundits are brought together to debate newly released films. This Saturday's installment will feature excerpts from an email debate between *National Post* comment editor Jonathan Kay [1] and York University political science professor David McNally [2] on Michael Moore's new film *Capitalism: A love story*.

What follows below is the full uncut version of their exchange.

Jonathan Kay: I know why I was picked for this panel: because Terry Corcoran wasn't available, and you wanted a right-wing true-believer to batter America's iconic left-wing punching bag. But I'm not co-operating — at least not entirely. *Capitalism: A Love Story* may be larded up with all sorts of gratuitous, intellectually dishonest stunts. Even so, Moore makes a strong case for his core thesis that unregulated capitalism has destabilized American middle class society in cruel and unsustainable ways. I'm a big fan of the free market. But when Moore introduces us to airline pilots making \$17,000 a year, and selling blood plasma to make ends meet, it becomes clear that America's collective value system has gone off the rails.

David McNally: Well, as the left-winger here, I agree that the "collective value system" that dominates American life "has gone off the rails." But before we start turning warm and fuzzy and declaring our agreement, let's cut to the chase. After all, Michael Moore is doing more than denouncing the obscenity of pilots living below the poverty line and selling their plasma to make ends meet. He is insisting that poverty, homelessness, disregard for the lives of working people are inherent in a system driven by the maximization of corporate profits. And this is the strength of the film. More than just expose injustice, it insists there is a social-economic system at fault: capitalism.

Jonathan: I disagree. Moore is not so much an enemy of capitalism, as a capitalist nostalgic: He longs for the brand of capitalism that held sway in the mid-20th century, when America produced most of what it needed on home turf, unions were strong, taxes were high, a single blue-collar paycheck could sustain a family, and income inequality was low. The point in the film in which he interviews his dad and waxes wistfully about pop's 30-year career at a Flint-area factory epitomizes this gauzy nostalgic streak.

In this sense, Moore is quite "conservative" in the European sense, which is to say he longs to preserve his society as it once was. In fact, some feminists may even be offended by the faint suggestion that life was better before women began working outside the home en masse.

Even in the modern era, Moore seems to believe that American capitalism can be saved — if Washington boosts taxes, provides universal health care and take some lessons from those German factory owners who let their own workers have a say in corporate policy.

Alison Broverman, moderator: For the purposes of this panel, I'm meant to be the neutral centered party, but, as usual, it's impossible to stay neutral on the subject of a Michael Moore film. Sure, I agree that Moore has a nostalgic streak that gets in the way of his film's thesis, and I could do without cheap stunts like wrapping Wall Street in crime scene tape. But ultimately, the underpaid pilots, the unfairly evicted, and the evil faces of Goldman Sachs had me wishing every company in the world ran like the idyllic employee-owned companies Moore profiles. So colour me manipulated - I'm on board with the idea that life in America would have been better if Roosevelt's proposed second bill of rights had passed.

Jonathan: One thing I think we can all agree on is that this could have been a better film than it was if Moore hadn't wasted half of it on cheap shots. I was particularly struck by his lengthy dwelling on the common practice whereby companies take out life insurance policies on their employees as a means to recover the costs associated with training and rollover. While this industry practice seems macabre, neither Moore nor anyone else argues that employers are actually *murdering* employees for the insurance money. So the entire segment is irrelevant to his indictment of capitalism in general and large corporations in particular (though I do agree that "Dead Peasants Insurance" is a creepy term).

David: I agree there is a nostalgic element to Moore's film. He fondly recalls a time when many American workers had it much better - more secure jobs, better wages and benefits. But what gives the film its edge isn't his waxing nostalgic; it's his condemnation of a system that rewards those in power for eliminating jobs, slashing wages, and busting unions in order to boost the corporate bottom line. Sure, he admires the New Deal reforms of the 1930s and '40s that put some limits on such behaviour. But capitalists bristled at them - and have spent the last quarter century destroying them, with predictable results. While Moore might like to turn the clock back, what is most compelling about the film is his dawning recognition that capitalism actually rewards those with power for inflicting hardship on the majority of people.

Alison: You're right on the money, David. Moore's passion and fury is evident throughout this film, and intertwined with his nostalgic longings is a keen sense of betrayal by the rotting system he spent his childhood buying into. While I'm not sure I bought into the Obama love-in Moore presents towards the end of the film, I appreciated the hopeful tone he leaves off with.

Jonathan: I notice that all three of us seem willing to look beyond Moore's manipulative tricks and clownish style to the core message of the film - the cruel inequities of American capitalism in its current manifestation. This reinforces the impression I got while watching *Capitalism: A Love Story* that this economically turbulent period we are living through comprises a golden opportunity for left-wing populists such as Moore. When times were good in the late 90s and early 00s, he just seemed like prosperity's annoying heckler. Now, his message is more relevant. The film itself may not penetrate much beyond Moore's usual art-house audience. But the broader redistributionist political trend it bespeaks, championed to a limited extent by his hero Barack Obama, may well transform America's approach to government.

David: Two points on this. First, one of the reasons Michael Moore matters is that he also connects with a large audience beyond the art-house crowd. He proudly wears his working class upbringing and spends a lot of time speaking to union crowds. And these people will flock to see the film. Secondly, this is in many ways his most radical film. The economic crisis seems to have convinced him that what ails America is more than just a slew of greedy, uncaring corporate titans. He now

sees their behaviour as part of a whole system – one he declares to be “radically evil.” And that speaks, I think, to the moment in which we live, when capitalism is being questioned in ways it hasn’t been for a very long time.

And yet the idea of employees as “dead peasants” will really resonate with millions who watch this film. It starkly captures a sense among working people that they are just dispensable items on a balance sheet, to be lopped off if necessary to help the bottom line. Moore gives voice to a widespread, unsettling feeling that unbridled capitalism could not care less for the lives and well-beings of the people who actually do the work that makes corporate America filthy rich. In this sense, he’s a bit like Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp – portraying the grotesque inequalities and cruelties of corporate capitalism run amok.

Jonathan: But that’s not an indictment of capitalism: it’s an indictment of bureaucratized society more generally. I absolutely guarantee that our own health system and government take no less a bloodless, uncaring, numerical approach to our lives when their accountants meet behind closed doors to make budgets.

David: Ah, therein lies another interesting discussion, in which I try to persuade you that bureaucratic state institutions have internalized the methods of management and administration developed by private corporations . . .

Jonathan: Well, Stalin certainly did a good job of aforesaid “internalization.” Why, he killed so many people that he’s practically as evil as General Motors! There — you knew this was going to come back to Stalin or Hitler *eventually*, didn’t you?

David: I don’t get too rattled by that one, as I have been on record condemning Stalinism as “bureaucratic state capitalism” since I first started writing about these things. For me there are a lot of other models of socialism, including democratic and anti-bureaucratic ones. I know some leftists tried to apologize for Stalinism, and I think this brought much discredit on the Left. Thankfully, some leftists were principled and outspoken opponents of his terror (and this had severe consequences for those in the USSR). I’d hate to think that our only choice is between unbridled capitalism and Stalinism. I take hope from the fact that throughout the global justice movement today there are exceptionally interesting discussions and debates around new models for “21st century socialism” . . .

Jonathan: Yes, socialists do propose an alternative to the murderous, top-down, totalitarian model of communism epitomized by Stalin and his various Third World admirers. That alternative is the grass-roots micro-socialist workers’ collectives, co-ops and union-run farm projects that are endlessly being trumpeted by Naomi Klein and other left-wing idealists as the wave of the future. In Klein’s “The Shock Doctrine,” these tiny home-spun, village-level projects are endlessly romanticized — even though they comprise a negligible part of all national economies (and always will). Michael Moore follows this route, taking us into a U.S. bread factory owned and operated by workers. This is presented as a paradise in which everyone is paid extravagant wages, and the enterprise is wildly successful — the sort of anecdotal collectivist vision that drove legions of otherwise sane intellectuals into paroxysms of utopian fervor a century ago, and laid the groundwork for the USSR and Communist China. As a century of disastrous experiments with “workers’ committees” and the like demonstrate, no large-scale economy can be run on this basis without resorting to dictatorship.

David: I appreciate, Jonathan, that you actually bother to read people like Naomi Klein. I won’t get into the strengths and weaknesses of what she and others argue (though I think there are both). What I’d ask you to consider is this: You want me and others to at least listen to the case that there might be morally defensible forms of capitalism. I think you owe thoughtful socialists the same hearing. That doesn’t mean you have to agree, just that the discussion is cut off if you insist that we

all will end up creating dictatorship if not mass murder. At that point the discussion tends to degenerate into “not true!”, “yes, it is!”

Jonathan: I think you’re misinterpreting me. I don’t mean to suggest that Naomi Klein, Michael Moore (and you?) aren’t sincere when you put forward a humane vision of political economy centered on grass-roots workers’ collectives. I am saying only that the empirically observed interplay between this good-faith blueprint and human nature leads inexorably to command economies and totalitarian politics.

Getting back to the film, Moore seems entirely oblivious to this fact. His gushing about the bread factory suggests he thinks that this is somehow a new model for the wholesale restructuring of a nation’s economy. Like all populists, he doesn’t think through the large-scale implications of his propaganda.

I will be interested to see how much penetration this film gets in multiplexes. His previous films often were *assumed* to have massive market penetration among blue-market audiences: Tweed-jacketted pundits assumed that since Moore dresses like a slob, the great unwashed must love him. But his box-office has traditionally been very tiny by Hollywood standards. A lot of the buzz around Michael Moore tends to be people like us, talking to other people like us, speculating about what blue-collar people (many of whom would much rather watch a fart-joke movie) will think of it.

David: Ah, the old human nature argument. You can’t have a democratically organized, co-operative society, it’s claimed, because it runs against human nature, which is said to be inherently selfish and greedy. But that’s all a little too easy. After all, anthropologists and historians have shown us that cooperation has been the key to most human societies. And lately cooperation has become absolutely central to how many evolutionary biologists think about our evolution as a species. Most human societies, in fact, have had extensive “commons” — forests, fields, lake and rivers — that belonged to the community and without which most people could not have survived. And despite all the incentives capitalism gives us to disregard others, it is amazing how often people still act out of compassion, generosity, and basic human solidarity towards others. No, human nature won’t do as an argument against a democratic socialism.

As for Michael Moore, whatever you think of his handful of examples, his real message in the film is that we should look at how dysfunctional capitalism is for so many people, and begin to imagine that democracy (“rule of the people” not rule of the wealthy) could be applied in the economic sphere.

Jonathan: I agree with you that we are hard-wired for altruism and co-operation ... in small, kin-based groups. Humans are remarkably good at sharing water and deer meat with siblings and children and parents, and even cousins and grandparents. The problem arises when those hunters and gatherers become office workers, and they are asked to interact with strangers for whom they feel no inborn sense of kinship (either literal or figurative). The call to civic duty in a democratic country helps address that problem to a certain extent — which is why capitalist societies have been able to maintain welfare-state policies. But that call isn’t powerful enough to support full-blown socialism — except, perhaps, in ethnically homogenous societies such as those of Scandinavia or Japan, which duplicate on a large scale the social instincts of an extended family. Highly diverse, individualistic nations such as the United States, on the other hand, don’t qualify.

That said, filmmakers such as Moore *are* effective at making us sit up and take notice when one segment or another in society is being shafted in some particularly vicious way. It is very easy for rich people in gated communities to simply ignore the plight of \$17,000-per-year airline pilots. And there is value in someone like Moore telling them how the other half lives. He will never convince America to embrace socialism. But he will encourage it to make capitalism more humane.

David: In many respects, all of this takes us back to Moore's final point in the film: democracy. If we agree that humans are capable of cooperation and that communities have the capacity to set goals and to collaborate in order to meet them, then it all comes down to the most effective ways of doing that. Moore shows us, as I think do recent events, that market regulation is deeply, often cruelly, flawed. I agree that state regulation of everything is not a desirable alternative. So, the question is whether there might be ways of democratically regulating our economic life that could be an improvement on both market-centered and state-centered models. My answer is "yes," and Moore clearly leans in that direction too. It's true that he is short on details. But the role of powerful art is to ask us big, challenging questions. Its job is not to provide answers, but to shock, cajole and provoke — to awaken us to problems some of us might want to ignore. And "Capitalism: A Love Story" surely succeeds in doing that.

P.S.

* From National Post "Full Comment". Posted: October 08, 2009, 5:11 PM by Jonathan Kay:

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http://www.tv.org/cfmx/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page_id=7&bpn=779503&ts=2009-05-01+20:00:35.0

Read more:

<http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2009/10/08/336113.aspx#ixzz0UNKMoiOL>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/pols/DavidMcNally.html>

[2] <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/pols/DavidMcNally.html>