

DISPUTATION CLXXIV

November 16, 2017

Fellow Peucinians,

Thursday night is upon us once again. For the final disputation before we give thanks to all that is good in our lives, two of our veterans must settle some unfinished business. From the depths of her Arendtian deep-dive, one of our senior members surfaces to level an accusation against a system that touches each and every one of us. And from the head of the table, our president will abdicate his seat to defend against an allegation that grows louder by the day.

RESOLVED: CAPITALISM IS UNJUST

Affirmative: Monique Wittig '18

Negative: Jean-Jacques Rousseau '19

As the totalitarian regimes began to crumble in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, many hailed economic liberalization as a new birth of freedom. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of his country, used a single word—*perestroika*—to describe a policy of openness that would emancipate Soviet citizens from both a single-party system and, eventually, a planned economy. The freedoms of capitalism and the freedoms of democracy were to go hand in hand.

For much of the twentieth century, Americans bought this Cold War narrative. But the America of today is a different story. While support for democracy remains high, less than half of our generation has a positive [view](#) of capitalism—and the numbers are dropping. Just as the election of Barack Obama gave hope to so many that, *finally*, their voices were being heard, the financial crisis of the same year gutted people's retirement accounts and left tens of thousands without jobs. This was enough to convince a growing number that our economic system was designed to work for the few, and that corruption was the capitalistic norm. It would always fail the many.

But Wittig charges the capitalist system with a more fundamental crime. It isn't simply market failures that make capitalism unjust; it does something to us. She holds that capitalism instills in us a love of profit that taints our relationships with others. In the race for success, we become atomized and begin to treat our fellow citizens as obstacles to our own well-being. Consumerism runs rampant; our possessions become our identity. We buy the latest products without a second thought as to how they were made, or whether the workers were mistreated. And because of the system's inherent inequality, the promises of freedom for all ring hollow. If capitalism reduces us to this and only a few can enjoy the bulk of its fruits, can we truly maintain that this system is fair? Is it not immoral at its core?

Rousseau, on the other hand, argues that the accusations against capitalism miss the bigger picture. More than any other system, capitalism enables us to live happy lives. Claims that common people are exploited under capitalism are misguided; as firms compete against each other, consumers are the ones that benefit. Businesses exist to serve us, not the other way around. As advanced technologies and other quality products become widely available, standards of living rise over time—this is what really matters. Moreover, capitalism is able to advance the general welfare while maximizing individual freedom. This system is indeed an extension of our democracy; it expands our political liberties into a marketplace that allows all of us to express our preferences. Ultimately, the people decide what something is worth.

Peucinians, you decide. Does capitalism free us or debase us? Are we bourgeois slaves, or do we just enjoy our leisure? Can commerce act as a binding force in a world divided? Are we complicit in the oppression of others?

Until tomorrow.

Yours,
Diderot

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus

[Follow-up]

And of course:

7:45pm
Semi-formal attire
Third Floor, Massachusetts Hall