

This Giant Beast That Is the Global Economy: Why the lack of seriousness?

By Joanne Laurier
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An Amazon Prime original, *This Giant Beast That Is the Global Economy* is an eight-episode documentary series that purports to make sense of the complex global situation. An admirable goal.

However, the political and social orientation of the writers and producers, who are distant from the conditions facing masses of people and circulate in the orbit of the Democratic Party, seriously limits if not fatally damages the series. In the end, *This Giant Beast* attempts to maintain or restore confidence in the ability of the existing economic and social order, perhaps reformed or recalibrated, to address the problems facing humanity.

Suffice it to say this is a documentary that manages to discuss the world economy without serious reference to capitalism, the working class, social revolution or any other indispensable concept—and this at a time when great numbers of youth are *consciously* rejecting capitalism in favor of socialism. The overall result is unserious and misleading.

Directed by Lee Farber and David Laven, and produced by Adam MacKay and Will Ferrell, among others, *This Giant Beast That Is the Global Economy* uses interviews, cartoons, graphics and skits involving a number of well-known actors, to make its case. The series features appearances by Ted Danson, Zach Galifianakis, Colin Hanks, Joel McHale, Ed O’Neill, Patton Oswalt, Rob Riggle, Mary Steenburgen, Jason Sudeikis, Meghan Trainor and Sasheer Zamata.

Comedian and actor Kal Penn serves as host and guide throughout the series. In fact, there are very few moments without him. His presence has a certain significance. Penn, a star of the *Harold & Kumar* film series and *House* on television, went to work in the Obama White House as Associate Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement—i.e., he was a public relations shill for the Obama administration. In 2012, he was co-chair of the incumbent president’s reelection committee, and in 2016, he supported Bernie Sanders. This is the politics of the series.

Each of *This Giant Beast*’s segments begins with a voiceover, “Whether you like it or not, we’re all connected

by money,” and then goes on to focus on one feature of economic life the creators believe is important. However, there is no apparent rhyme or reason to the order or selection of phenomena.

For example, one episode treats money laundering, another concerns the fate of the rubber industry and a third, superficially and ahistorically, discusses the role of money. The most substantial episode centers on artificial intelligence, and the most juvenile asks whether rich people have to be “dicks.”

Some of the facts or peculiarities (there is an element of sensationalism here) are interesting, potentially significant, but the series’ basic approach is to take up this or that economic ill or dilemma as an isolated phenomenon entirely removed from its historical and social context—so the filmmakers’ supposed attempt at demystifying, in point of fact, mystifies.

Circumstances that involve the impoverishment of millions or the looting of the economy by the ruling elite are essentially played for laughs. In Episode 1, devoted to money laundering, Penn banters flippantly about the Panama Papers, the leaked documents that provided a glimpse into the criminal world of tax avoidance carried out by the globe’s banks and billionaires, with journalist Jan Stroyk.

The second episode, “Are Rich People Dicks or Do Dicks Get Rich?,” epitomizes the crass and superficial outlook of its creators. We meet Belarusian American entrepreneur and “Internet personality” Gary Vaynerchuk, who enthuses that “Capitalism is awesome.” Are we meant to derive an unfavorable impression? Penn simply laughs along with Vaynerchuk.

In a brief portion of this episode on Thomas A. Edison and Henry Ford, Penn lets us know: “I think I’m starting to get it. A capitalist structure channels the power of dick [bad, evil] energy, and can actually help us all get better goods and services.” After all, Ford, a ferocious anti-Semite as Penn acknowledges, “improved lives for the next 100 years.” The segment ends up, ridiculously, offering a successful sex toy manufacturer in California as an example

of a rich individual who is both good to his employees and *not* a psychopath.

The series' buffoonish tone speaks to two issues: (a) the creators and performers believe (*à la* Michael Moore) they cannot retain the viewers' attention in any other way and (b) in any event, these issues are not life-and-death for them. One online commentator offered what he meant to be praise for *This Giant Beast*: "It should be an imposing documentary, but it never is thanks to the light tone that makes its big, imposing questions feel manageable. *This Giant Beast* never feels like a severe and complex search for the truth. It feels like a surprisingly informative conversation with your buddy over beers."

"A.I. Is the Future. Will it Keep Us Around to Enjoy It?" is the fourth and weightiest of the segments. One commentator makes the claim that artificial intelligence taken to its conclusion will mean full unemployment. Arguments are therefore put forward in favor of a universal basic income and a more "social democratic society," as though such measures would be accepted by the world's ruling classes, who are rolling back what's left of the welfare state and social reform everywhere. In this section, too, we hear from a couple of Indian entrepreneurs about "capitalism for good...business used to create a greater good."

AI expert Andrew McAfee argues that the enormous challenges facing society—such as climate change and feeding people—are too complex and overwhelming for human brains, and that AI and more advanced computers by themselves will solve these issues. But the problem is not the complexity or scope of the issues—all of them could be solved rationally and decisively in the absence of a profit-driven ruling class.

Technique and science do not develop in thin air, but in class society. As Leon Trotsky noted, "Technique in itself cannot be called either militaristic or pacifistic. In a society in which the ruling class is militaristic, technique is in the service of militarism."

As the WSWS has written: "In a socialist society, the artificial intelligence and robotics revolution will create the circumstances for a massive elevation of not only the economic well-being of the population, but also its cultural life. The replacement of tedious and back-breaking occupations will mean not mass unemployment and destitution, but rather greater leisure and an expansion of workers' opportunities for education, family life and cultural enrichment."

"Is Money Bullshit?" is the inane question asked in Episode 7, which starts with a bartering community in Spain and ends up musing about Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies as the potential wave of the future. Along

the way, commentators opine that money is a "system of trust" and treat in passing President Richard Nixon's 1971 decision to unlink the dollar from gold, a milestone that meant the end of fixed currency relations and was part of the unraveling of the mechanisms put in place after World War II to regulate the global economy.

The *objective* contradictions of the profit system are a closed book to the series' creators.

Episode 8, "A Global Corruption Tour," presents the academic Robert Reich as one of the series' heroes, "a man of integrity." Reich served in the administrations of Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. He was Clinton's secretary of labor from 1993 to 1997 and was a member of President-elect Barack Obama's economic transition advisory board. Reich pontificates about corruption, and Penn's voiceover boasts that he even made a film about social inequality. Of course, in practice, the various administrations Reich served facilitated social polarization and further enriched the super-wealthy.

Most disturbingly, this segment of *This Giant Beast* touts Singapore, albeit with some reservations about its lack of "press freedom," as one of the least corrupt countries in the world. In reality, as the center of finance capital in Southeast Asia, the Singapore ruling elite relies on a police-state to protect its assets. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "what really checks all the right boxes for many of the world's ultra-rich is Singapore's obsession with order."

Overall, this confused hodge-podge, with its recipe book of reformist or utopian measures, none of which will ever be implemented under capitalism, emerges out of "progressive" Democratic Party circles in Hollywood and the media, the circles ecstatic about Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the "Green New Deal."

The series is a reaction in part to the growing radicalization of young people in particular and an effort to corral it within the confines of the existing system. However, *This Giant Beast's* very unconvincing quality, rooted in the unstable and politically inconsistent social milieu that produced it, is unlikely to have the desired effect.

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