Food Stamp Cuts - Western Capitalism & “Useless Eaters”

Donald Trump recently announced changes to the US Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly called “Food Stamps.” This program enables low income Americans to buy food. As a result, 750,000 people will immediately lose their food assistance, while it is expected that as many as 3 million will be deprived of their benefits in the near future.

Meanwhile, Michael Bloomberg, former New York City Mayor, has announced that he is running for President of the United States as a Democrat. Many are revisiting his leadership of New York City and the many controversial things he did. Among them is was a subway advertisement campaign intended to discourage teen girls from becoming mothers by shaming them. The ads, showing a small child with the words “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen” had the obvious, though unstated goal of increasing abortion among low-income New York City residents, many of which are not white.

Unemployment in the USA is low currently, and despite numerous projections that things could get bad soon, the stock market numbers and other measurements currently look somewhat better than most of the last decade. So, why cut food stamps?

Eliminating “Useless Eaters” To Save Capitalism

Those who equate the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany overlook many very key differences between the two countries and their political systems. One of the most obvious is this: the Soviet Union worked very hard to expand its population, while the Nazis worked very hard to reduce their population.

As Stalin’s Five Year Economic plans created huge steel mills and power plants, and new universities sprung up across the Soviet Union amid the abolition of illiteracy, a special prize called “Mother of the Soviet Union” was given to any woman who had more than 10 children. The Soviet government wanted more people to be born and to join in the project of building and developing a new, strong socialist country.

However, Nazi Germany did the opposite and began forcibly sterilizing people. In 1934, just a year after the Nazis took power, 300,000 to 400,000 people were forcibly sterilized. A law was passed in 1935 making it illegal for anyone to get married if any kind of hereditary ailment could be passed on to the children.

Following the sterilizations came the exterminations. The Nazi government began referring to disabled people as “useless eaters” and executing them in gas chambers. Eventually, the Nazi state began exterminating Jews, Gypsies, Homosexuals and Political Dissidents. The justification for this “final solution” was belief that all social defects were hereditary and needed to be eliminated from the gene pool.

The Nazis were big believers in the concept of “overpopulation,” though this was a concept they did not invent. The term comes from the work of Robert Thomas Malthus, the British economist who blamed the French Revolution and the social unrest of the 1790s on the population growing at a faster rate than the food supply.

John D. Rockefeller, the billionaire and founder of Standard Oil (now Exxon-Mobil) was a big supporter of Malthus and his economic theories. Eventually Rockefeller bankrolled the Birth Control League of Margaret Sanger, now known as “Planned Parenthood.” The organization pushed for the legalization of contraception and abortion. One of the posters used to raise funds for the Birth Control League was a poster of a starving child holding out an empty bowl begging for food.
Though Margaret Sanger had once been a socialist, as she became the voice of the “Birth Control” movement she published explicitly racist books and pamphlets and spoke at Ku Klux Klan events. She also began using phrases like “the cruelty of charity” arguing that the social welfare state was immoral because it encouraged inferior people to breed.

When Margaret Sanger traded socialism for sex, and abandoned class struggle in pursuit of sexual liberation, she stopped advocating for the working class. During the 1930s depression, the Communist Party USA organized “Hunger Marches” saying “Don’t Starve, Fight!” The Communist Party USA said the great depression pointed toward the need for the US economy to reorganized in a rational way, to serve the people, not the irrationality of profits. However, Margaret Sanger took the opposite approach, working to reduce “overpopulation” by eliminating “useless eaters.”

**Automation & The Crisis of Capitalism**

The causes of the Great Depression were rooted in the technological advancements of the 1920s. Henry Ford’s assembly line innovations and other breakthroughs made it easier for radios, cars, and other commodities to be churned out more efficiently than ever before. Soon the market was glutted with more products than ever before, produced more efficiently than ever before. However, across the western world millions of workers were left “outcast and starving” because they had no place at the assembly line. They could not afford to buy these products, and soon banks failed, corporations collapsed, and the US experienced an episode of mass malnutrition.

The 2008 financial crisis was the opening explosion of a long-term crisis rooted in the same problem, decades later. The innovations of Henry Ford and the 1920s factory owners were child’s play compared to the continuing computer revolution, marching forward at a rapid pace since the 1980s. Andrew Yang, the maverick Democratic Presidential candidate continues to highlight the looming threat of mass unemployment due to technology. He told the New York Times: “All you need is self-driving cars to destabilize society...we’re going to have a million truck drivers out of work who are 94 percent male, with an average level of education of high school or one year of college. That one innovation will be enough to create riots in the street. And we’re about to do the same thing to retail workers, call center workers, fast-food workers, insurance companies, accounting firms.”

Among Silicon Valley forecasters, the alarm bells about automation are going off, and proposals such as “universal basic income” are being raised. The underlying basis of the discussion is the same as Malthus, Sanger and Rockefeller’s discussion in times past. The voices raising alarm about the crisis of automation are all essentially asking “Soon millions and millions of Americans will have no place in the economy. What do we do about all the useless eaters?”

Western capitalism has entered a stage where it views the population not as an asset, but as a burden. Instead of seeing each citizen as capable of creating a contribution to society, and making the country better, the population is viewed as a problematic horde that must be carefully managed and prevented from causing further problems. “Populism” is presented as a great evil, because it involves the rabble asserting political aspirations deemed by the elite to be unacceptable.

Even much of what passes for “socialism” in 21st Century America, addresses the question in the same manner. The “Democratic Socialist” current argues that as technology eliminates jobs, more money should be spent to provide healthcare and education to the population. At the same time, however, the “Democratic Socialist” voices like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders advocate reducing US living standards and consumption in the name of environmentalism. They argue that Americans consume too many resources, and in the name of climate sustainability, the population should transition to a lifestyle of less extravagance.

However, the basic solution to this long standing problem seems to be ignored. Karl Marx’s magnum opus, the economic textbook called “Capital” discusses the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation and workers competition with machines, pointing toward the only real way to resolve this contradiction.

The banks, factories and industries must be operated in a rational way. The economy must not operate on the basis of profits. In a centrally planned economy, in which profits are no longer in command, automation would increase the wealth of society, and abundance would not result in poverty.

The pessimism of the 21st century western world is rooted in the economic reality that under the rule of profits, technology and historical progress continue to point toward great catastrophe. It is only by re-opening the question of whether or not socialism is a viable alternative that this pessimism can be overcome.
Caleb Maupin is a political analyst and activist based in New York. He studied political science at Baldwin-Wallace College and was inspired and involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.