

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

ABIGAIL DISNEY: THE AMERICAN DREAM OR NIGHTMARE FOR WORKERS?

LAURA FLANDERS: We're starting another year with inequality gaping. Over the last decade, the median net worth of the top 10 billionaires in the world has nearly tripled. In fact, all but two of the top 10 are centibillionaires. It's inconceivable to most Americans, who are for the first time earning less than their parents. Economic mobility is on the decline, but that doesn't stop the entertainment industry which continues to serve up American dream rags to riches stories. And no company does that more energetically than Disney. When the granddaughter of one of the founders of that company received an invitation from a Disney employee to look into the quality of life for workers at Disney's flagship theme park Disneyland, Abigail Disney found that some cast members, as they're called, were earning 1/2000th of the earnings of CEO Bob Iger. Working full-time, they were barely getting by. She thought that was wrong. She wrote to Iger, she testified in Congress, and ultimately she did what she does: she made a film. The result is a very personal documentary, "The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales," which calls out inequality and the policies and values that create it, not just at Disney but across the business world. Abby Disney is an Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker, an activist with the Patriotic Millionaires, and the granddaughter of Roy Disney, who co-founded the company with Walt. The film co-directed with Kathleen Hughes is available for streaming now, and I am so happy to welcome Abigail Disney to our screens. It must be quite something to be a Disney in this world.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The only word for it is weird. If you're looking for Mickey, turns out he is absolutely everywhere, and if he's attached to your last name, then you just can't lose him.

LF: Have you always had a sense of corporate responsibility or responsibility around the name?

AD: Yes, I always have had a sense. I think when we were very young, we used to go to the park, as we called it, with my grandfather or with my parents. And usually there was an occasion that we were going there for, like a parade was starting, or the Small World ride was opening. That's one of my best memories. And so we would be dressed to the nines, and we would be on our very best behavior. And so I think the place... We were always aware that we had a special relationship to this place, and that everybody else really loved it. And then, as I got older, I got interested in other people's responsibilities and other corporations and other things going on, and kind of left some space between myself and the company in terms of my activism and my thinking about social justice. But I kind of couldn't stay away from it forever, because it was just this gaping problem in the center of everything

LF: And 2018 is really when things took a shift. What happened?

AD: There had been a series of stories, as there very often are, about workers at Disneyland not being well treated, but it had really started to pop up much more often. And so I had allowed myself to kind of not really look at the problem for a long time. I figured that wasn't my job, I would do other things, but then I got this very direct message from a worker at Disneyland on Facebook, and I actually never look at Facebook messages, I have no idea why I looked at his message, but once I'd read it, it kind of felt like I couldn't unread it, and I couldn't un-be in relationship suddenly with this individual person. And that when it became personal, then I just felt like I needed to follow what my sense of responsibility was telling me to do, which was to go out there and talk to people.

LF: Well, what was so striking, and you see it in the film, is the love so many of those employees have or had or kind of want to have to the whole Disney brand and their experience. That part of it was super moving, I thought.

AD: I think it's really moving, and it's one of my favorite things about the company, although it's also deeply painful to talk about, to be honest, because I also know that that's one of the reasons that the company gets away with paying people so poorly. That they kind of use that as a way of stringing people on and promising people better things later if they will only try hard enough.

LF: You found that many of the workers including the guy who wrote to you, Ralph, were barely getting by. So you go off on an investigation as to how did things get to be this way. And would I be right in saying that you began with a sense that it wasn't like that in your grandfather's time?

AD: My grandfather definitely had his flaws, but he was a decent person, and he really, really, really cared about individual people. I think this is where I got it from. He cared about the person he was interacting with, not the position that person held. And so he didn't really value the CEO any more highly than he valued somebody who was sweeping the sidewalk. And that was a value that he instilled in people who worked for the company. That was why he always picked up garbage when he was in the park. He felt really strongly that running a company was about taking care of the people around you. You know, that's rank paternalism, I recognize that, but it's better than the soulless kind of treating people like cogs in a machine that we have now.

LF: What did you find that change to have been caused by?

AD: There was a conscious movement afoot in the 70s and 80s among a certain kind of corporate interest, namely the managements and the boards and kind of the ruling class of corporate America. They wanted to change the way we understood corporations and their role in public life, and where individuals fit into the picture around corporations. And they were people who genuinely believed America's best and most important interest was their corporate community. They wanted to change America into a place where people put the corporation ahead of themselves, people put themselves ahead of others. There are still a handful of companies that operate in the way that my grandfather operated Disney, but they are in the minority. And what happens is, even when they last, and even when they survive in the context of this incredibly cutthroat environment, they'll get bought up by a private equity company eventually or exited by their owners in some way.

LF: Heather McGhee, the economist who we've had on our program, talks about the role that race played in all of this and what it was that shifted things when we went from a period perhaps in the 30s where government was expanding opportunity for the white working class to a period where government was actually trying to enforce civil rights laws and maybe shift the status quo a bit to become more inclusive of women, and people of color, and immigrants.

AD: Race is the American Achilles heel. It has always been the Achilles heel. And one of the things that Heather talks about in that book that is so important is that we were all vulnerable. This hearty, healthy economy that my grandfather thrived in, which had a more collective spirit and which was more fair-minded about how it treated people also had this fatal characteristic, which was that it tolerated the oppression and suppression of large swaths of the American public. It abided a level of cruelty and heartlessness. And so when the cruelty and the heartlessness started to grow like a virus inside of the body politic, there was no stopping it, because there was always such a high tolerance for cruelty. So what she says in the film that's really important is, what's happening for white Americans isn't new. They are living the reality that Black and Brown Americans have lived all along, and if we had cared about their wellbeing, we might have been better equipped to fight this challenge that came from above.

LF: The point is so important that it wasn't just that the generation of your grandfather and his brother was kinder gentler, it was also the fact that government was keeping people in check, along with unions. And the unions played a huge role in all of this as they're playing today. But the power of unions has shrunk tremendously. So we have something like 6% of private industry workers unionized, way down from where it was even when you and I were born. Talk about how that then enabled these corporations to get government off their backs when it comes to everything you're talking about.

AD: The assault on the union movement was a very thoughtful strategic move. And if you remember Ronald Reagan's election, he ran in support of the air traffic controllers, actually. He made public statements during his campaign supporting the air traffic controllers. But in February after his inauguration, so less than a month after he was inaugurated, he did one of the most famous things he did, which was to fire the entire union. And he didn't just fire the entire union, he made it so that nobody in that union could ever hold a government job again. So he didn't just crush that union, he destroyed everyone in it. And it was important that he do it that way. And there are letters. If you read, I think it's Kim Fein's book "Invisible Hands," she quotes a CEO in a letter saying, "Oh, we all knew that was a message. We all knew what Ronald Reagan was trying to communicate to us when he did that." It was a green light to go after unions and that government wouldn't be representing their interests anymore. And it destroyed the collective spirit. It destroyed the idea that when you show up for work, you show up for work shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of other people who are your peers, who have a shared interest with you, and that therefore collective bargaining was the best way for you to represent your own interests in the workplace. So it splintered everyone, and absent collective bargaining, we are all subject to the tender mercies of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Collective bargaining is the only way workers have to democratically represent their own interests in the workplace.

LF: Isn't what we're talking about just capitalism? The great unspoken word?

AD: No, no actually, and even if you resurrected Adam Smith today, he would look at what we have and say, "My goodness, what have you done?" It's the difference between a religion and the fundamentalist version of that religion and a fundamentalist version of anything is a clinging to a handful of tenets and precepts at the expense of the spirit of the thing that you're supporting. And so we live under a regime of fundamentalist masculinity, frankly. We live under a regime of fundamentalist capitalism. And even Milton Friedman, the patron saint of this form of capitalism himself said, "Within reason." Within the confines of public mores and values. And so we just kind of raced to the other side of the pendulum and not that what we had before was all the way out at nine o'clock, but we're over here at three, and what is holding it here is a now very moneyed class. And now that Citizens United, such an investment in taking off all the guardrails on how money could play a role in politics has caused all this money and these moneyed interests to flood into the space to now protect their already substantial advantages.

LF: So the question is what do we do about it? I mean, you and I may disagree about how capitalism functions. I read most of that Thomas Piketty book, and it seemed to suggest that this is inevitable, that with incremental growth, or rather really exponential growth, you are going to get these huge disparities between rich and poor. We're there now with this huge portion of all global wealth in the hands of basically a handful of people. Is it shiftable? I mean, what can we do?

AD: I think that the first thing that has to happen is we have to find a way to get money out of politics. And that sounds like an impossible task, except that we still have somewhat of a democracy in place. We still find politicians like Bernie Sanders succeeding by raising money from lots and lots of individuals who give a little instead of a handful of individuals who give a lot. And as long as we still have the shreds of that democracy, we still have a hope of, for instance, passing laws to protect us from the Citizens United decision and constraining money in politics.

LF: Citizens United, the Supreme Court decision that took all limits off campaign financing in the name of corporate free speech.

AD: Thomas Piketty is right. What he says is if you predicate your central social enterprise around the idea that there must be year over year growth ad infinitum, then you are eventually going to reach a limit that can't be sustained. But the growth rate that we've been insisting on over the last 30 years or so has been in the 6 and 7 and 12 and 14%. And that's a highway to hell for everybody, ultimately. But a 2% growth rate can be accommodated over the long term if you have a healthy, vigorous government pushing back over time on the excesses and on the ways in which that growth rate is eating into our basic fundamental resources and rights.

LF: I remember talking to venture capitalist Nick Hanauer, who I think you know also, who said soon after the financial crash that he thought the rich should watch out, that there were going to be people coming with pitchforks. I haven't seen those pitchforks, but I have seen a few more labor strikes than ever, a huge spike in labor activity in 2022. Where do you see signs of hope?

AD: Well, first of all, there have been pitchforks, and they were there on January 6th, right?

LF: I guess those weren't the ones I was thinking of.

AD: Yes, but they were pitchforks with an analysis that had misdirected their energies. But what they have fundamentally over there on the far right wing is an anti-corporate analysis. And when Ron DeSantis pushed back on Disney and talked about when you hear about woke capitalism, that is the sound of their anti-corporate ethos, because they know they can't hold people forever unless they speak up about what is so plainly happening to their own people, right? So they have used and misdirected the anti-corporate impulse that is a fundamental populist impulse and set us against each other and set us against the government in all sorts of ways. And on top of it, they armed us up, and they highly destabilized every nook and cranny of American culture right now.

So it was never going to be as straightforward as a bunch of pitchforks in front of the castle. The real problem, the persistent problem is wealth inequality, and that starts with, for instance, the way wealth is taxed. I own. That's what I do for money is own. I sit on my couch owning things, and people show up for work every day and pay a higher effective tax rate on the money that comes into them because they work than I pay on the money that comes to me because I sit on my couch and own. So that's a very fundamental failure of applying our moral systems and our basic shared values to the tax code. And a tax code is an expression of norms and values. It's nothing else but that. So we really need to elect people who will fight to help empower the IRS to actually collect the taxes that are owed them, first of all, because you're more likely to be audited if you're low income than if you have a lot of money. So let's start auditing some of the people who are making a game out of evading taxes. Let's change the codes so it taxes work at a more favorable rate than ownership. And let's think about a wealth tax. I think the wealth tax is the only way we're actually going to make a difference. And then a high, high, high income tax at the top bracket like one that discourages you from wanting to make \$2 million a year, because nobody needs \$2 million a year. So a punitive top end. My grandfather became a very wealthy man paying upwards of 70 to 75% on his income.

LF: Bernie Sanders said that he ran on, well, among other things, there should be no billionaires.

AD: I agree, because honestly, if you can't live on \$999 million, you've got so many bigger problems than just that last million dollars. Honestly, if you really stop to consider what \$1 billion is, it is just a sickening amount of money.

LF: Were you ever inclined, as I watched your interviewing these folks, did you ever feel that you should just give them your money?

AD: Yes, of course, of course. I feel that every day, and I've felt that every day since I was very young, and I have struggled with that for a long time. As I got deeper and deeper into my activism, my philanthropy, and my thinking about this, it came to me that what I have is a drop in the bucket as compared to what needs to happen. And I could help a lot of individual people over the short term, or even over their lifetimes I could do that, but I wouldn't change anything, and so there would just be other people who would flood into the space that they had vacated by rising on the ladder. And I'm worried about the spot at the bottom of the ladder, which is filled with people who will never have a chance to rise. If I don't use my resources to change the circumstances, the values and the structures that led me to have these kinds of advantages, then I've wasted it.

LF: If you call the American dream the idea that you can rise from rags to riches, that there's mobility in our economy, a fantasy tale, as you do at the top of the film, I don't know whether you go so far as to say the dream is dead, but it does leave me wondering what would be a dream worthy of this century, worthy of the 21st century, knowing all that we know about what, as you mentioned, this endless pursuit of individual wealth and growth, where it's brought us,

AD: We used to share a dream about shared accomplishment, shared success, shared wellbeing. That dream has always been there under the surface. We need to empower the people who believe in that dream. We need to bring them into leadership, and we need to readjust the American mind, which has been kind of poisoned with fantasies about rising. If Disney were to say our value is not just the profits that come to our shareholders, but how are our people are treated, our effect on the environment, our effect on the American imagination, and they in some ways do that very well, that last part, there are so many companies that would follow them. I really believe that if you could turn one company, especially a company like Disney, you could really make visible what's possible.

LF: Abby Disney, thank you so much for your work, for your film. You also host a podcast. I encourage people to check it out.

AD: All Ears with Abigail Disney.

LF: It's been a pleasure talking with you. Thank you so much.

AD: Great to talk to you too.

LF: Family tradition, history, custom, it's all very hard to go up against and a whole lot of people have been punished for doing exactly that. I think anxieties about losing traditions are behind a lot of people's anxieties these days about change. But at the same time, a whole lot of change making is happening precisely because people have started grappling with the histories that led them to this point. A friend of mine, for example, recently inherited some land from a racist grandfather which she decided to give back to the Native American nation from which it had been stolen centuries back. In so doing, did she run up against some disregard, some resentment, anger in her family? Sure. But she also enriched her own life enormously through the new relationships she's gained as a result. Abby Disney looked at her family history and took what she liked to use against what she didn't, lifted up a part of her family history to challenge the present. And maybe we can all do that. Look closely enough, and there are probably parts of your family history that do represent the values you want to enliven today. I know those exist in

my life. There are bits I like, bits I don't like. So how about we thought of biography less as Bible and more as buffet. Take what you like, leave the rest. Feel good about the most of it. I'm Laura Flanders. There's much more to be said, and you can hear my full conversation with Abby Disney through a subscription to our free podcast, which I urge you to check out. You can get all the information at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura, and thanks for joining us. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.