

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 4 Episode 4: Marlene Engelhorn
Let's Talk About Tax, Baby
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Abby

We do say Mahr-ley-nuh, right? Because the American impulse is to say "Mahr-leen."

Marlene

Just think of Marlene Dietrich and then you have a hunch of what this should sound like. I'm named after her.

Abby: Are you really?

Marlene

Yes. She died the day before I was born.

Abby

Oh, that's so, so, so cool to be named after Marlene.

Marlene

But I can't sing.

Abby

Oh, it's really nice to meet you. I have only read it about you up until now, but, uh, I've been anxious to meet you.

Marlene

Nice to meet you too. I'm excited that I get to talk to you about things that I like talking about.

Abby

We are a tiny demographic, aren't we? Okay, here we go. Here we go.

[show open]

Abby

My guest today is Marlene Engelhorn. She made headlines recently when she announced that she wants the government to take away—through taxes—most of the multi-million dollar fortune she inherited from her very wealthy Austrian family. Austria, like the United States, is a country with no wealth tax.

The headlines, heralding Marlene's announcement were incredulous:

"Heiress says, tax me now." "Who wants to pay taxes?" Some writers even wondered whether the 30 year old Marlene is too young to make such a momentous decision for herself. Inheriting money is a subject I know a thing or two about. For

years, I have been begging our government in the United States to tax me and my fellow plutocrats much more than it does now, in part because the rich just keep getting richer while everyone else keeps falling behind.

It's a really important conversation. Think about it. Philanthropy is optional, it's voluntary. So yes, lots of wealthy people give money away to worthy causes, but only because they feel like it. If they feel like giving money to feed the poor, they can do that. But if they feel like giving money to bring more two-toed sloths to southwestern Nebraska, they can do that, too.

Nothing says that what they do with their money has to be important, or valuable, or effective. Taxes, on the other hand, are not optional, and they flow to the things that we, as equal participants in a healthy democracy, decide are important to us.

What I love about Marlene is that she talks about all of this with humor and respect for everyone's dignity. She's formed a tax justice organization, not surprisingly called taxmenow, and I am delighted to have a chance to speak to a fellow member of one of the smallest demographics on earth: people who are questioning their disproportionate wealth and power, and working to end both.

So welcome Marlene.

Marlene

Thank you for having me. I'm blushing a bit now.

Abby

Good! That is my intention, even though nobody can see it. Tell me about growing up. You grew up in Vienna. Yes? Was there a lot of wealth and privilege and whatever else in your growing up?

Marlene

Yes, I grew up in Vienna and, the way a rich kid like me grows up really starts before I am born, frankly, when the place where I will live is being decided upon. And so my parents got a house that people that are rich like me will call a big house, but really should be called a mansion.

But, that is an ostentatious word and we shouldn't use it, right? Also, we don't say that we are very rich. We say "we're doing well." One of those euphemisms.

Abby

"We're comfortable."

Marlene

"We're comfortable." Yes. "We're very grateful for what we have." And so it starts with that. So I grew up in this huge house and, not to say a mansion, and then got into a private kindergarten, and into a private school. And there's this logic, self-evidence

and rhythm to how rich and privileged kids get put into the places where they only meet themselves, like other rich and privileged kids.

Abby

Mm-hmm.

Marlene

And then I went to public university and then all of a sudden I found myself in a crowd of people where a lot of them weren't wealthy. Not nearly close to the amount of wealth that's in my family, but just in general, as well.

And so, all of these people, they had a reality of having to work in order to study because that was just the way they had to do it or else they wouldn't be able to. Whereas for me, it was never a question of whether I could afford something, but only if I wanted to or not.

Abby

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Marlene

Which is a very unique perspective on money, when you don't have to think of "can or can I not do something with it," but just, "what the hell do I wanna do with it?"

Abby

So your sense of social justice started to bud and develop in university. Is that where you began to think about it?

Marlene

I think these things are more complicated because it starts early on when you first realize that some things aren't fair, even if it's ridiculous. Things that you experience, like ridiculous for an adult, I guess. But for a child that experiences it the first time is cheated, for instance, in a game, or the first time something unfair happens, where you get punished for something you didn't do, you realize some things aren't fair.

And I think that's where your idea of what's fair and just, what these principles mean, start. And this idea develops over time and it's fueled by the experiences you make, by the relationships that you're in.

Abby

Can I ask, do you have siblings?

Marlene

Yes, I have two siblings.

Abby

You have two siblings. Where are you in the order?

Marlene

I am the oldest, the eldest child.

Abby

Okay. I'm just curious because I'm in the middle of four, and I've always thought my indignation and unfairness came from the middle of the four, when everything is unfair when you're in the middle. But, you're the oldest, that's interesting. But anyway, go on.

Marlene

I could argue that everything is unfair when you're the oldest, because it's easier for everyone who comes after you. After you plow through the way and then they come and they just harvest what you sow? No, no, no, no, no.

Abby

That's true. Well, maybe everything's unfair when you're a sibling, period.

Marlene

Yeah, maybe. I wouldn't give them up for the world. They are the best people. I love them to bits.

Abby

Yes. Yes. Were you able to sort of fly under the radar and not seem as wealthy as you were? Because that's a very common trait in people who inherit money, there's a lot of hiding it.

Marlene

Yes, absolutely. I didn't want people to know. It's something that can be such a conflicting topic that you would want to not bring it to the table, in order to avoid it.

And I also tried to avoid it, but my close friends did have an idea of me and my family being wealthy. They didn't know even closely how wealthy. And I was not gonna tell them, because I also thought it was kind of weird to like flunk numbers into people's faces.

Transparency about wealth is not something that happens a lot in my family. In my family you don't talk about money, you own it.

Abby

Well that's actually one of the traits of being wealthy. You have to talk about money if you don't have it.

Marlene

Yes. But even so, like, with me, once I knew that my family had access to immense amounts of wealth because my - I had first conversations about this, because I turned 18 and stuff.

It still is a feeling where like, okay, all of a sudden you can't even begin to fathom how you're not like everyone else anymore, just because of the wealth that you touched. But at the same time that you are, because you're just a human being. You're not better than anyone, you're not worse than anyone. You're just as average as everybody else, with your peaks and your lows, distributed among whatever you can and cannot do well.

Abby

So, you mentioned a meeting when you were 18.

I had a meeting like that when I was 18. So, I know the meeting you're talking about, and it's not something most people understand. Can you talk about that meeting?

Marlene

It was my mom sat me down. She was like, "So, I gotta talk to you." And I'm like, "Oh God. This sounds like this is gonna be an 'Oh God' kind of conversation."

And it was, because, I don't know what the proper English expression is, I fell to the floor. Is that one? My mouth fell to the—

Abby

Yeah, it knocked me over

Marlene

It knocked me over. There you go. Mom knocked me over.

Abby

I was gobsmacked is one of my favorites. And she said what?

Marlene

She said, "Look, so you come from this family and there was this business, and so there's like, wealth. Please don't tell anyone." That was one of the earliest sentences. "Don't talk about this, because it's not gonna do you any good talking about it. Either people are gonna judge you for it because they don't know you well enough not to." And frankly, fair enough. But also, "it's not information that anybody needs about you."

And, eventually I came to understand that that's not entirely true, frankly. This *is* information everybody needs about me. So, I did decide to talk about it to everybody who will listen to me, like you, for instance.

Abby

Yeah. Um, a And I kind of came to this same conclusion, as well, because that not talking about it was a message of shame, which is so strange because everyone who looks upon people with wealth feel like, "Well, obviously I'd be incredibly proud of this and I'd show it around." But, in my upbringing, it was an embarrassment and

something to pretend wasn't there, but to rely on and to consider a necessary condition nevertheless.

Marlene

And I think what happens is, when you treat money in wealth, not as in money that everybody can relate to, we're not talking money that anybody can relate to.

Wealth is the amount of money where needing it is not a question anymore. The question of need doesn't exist. And with wealth, when you treat it as a secret, immediately you get into this position of having to protect the secret.

But also this secret becomes like a cancer - it grows on itself. It grows inside you, it eats away at you. This can show in various conflicting feelings like shame that you mentioned, but also anger, with me was a lot of anger. But, really what happens is it translates very easily into this self-evident way of dealing with wealth, which is to protect it and to grow it.

And they will always tell you that you don't have enough. It doesn't matter how much money you have, a financial advisor will tell you it's not enough, you need to grow it. And then the second reason comes in. That already makes you anxious. Like "what? It's not enough? It's a multi-million sum, it's not enough?"

And then they tell you, "because if you don't, that's stupid." And you're like, "first of all, I don't wanna be scared, but second of all, I don't wanna be stupid either."

Abby

Yeah.

Marlene

And so there's like, and if you don't talk about this openly with people who have different perspectives and who are not from within this industry, then this doesn't help to break out of this cage.

So talking about it is really the best thing you can do.

Abby

Right. So it was the investment professionals right away that were saying "you now have a job you didn't ask for, and didn't earn, and that job is to keep and protect and to grow this pot that you didn't want," right?

Marlene

Well, when I was announced the inheritance, immediately I was surrounded by financial advisors to be like, "yeah, we can take care of this." And I'm like, "I think I'm gonna take care of this myself, thank you very much." So that was an interesting conversation. When I have these sorts of conversations, especially when I'm surrounded by, and now I'm so sorry, but I have to say, by older white men.

Abby

Yes. I know.

Marlene

Sorry, excuse me. I immediately get extremely frustrated because I'm not an old white man and I'm not being talked to as if I were. But I'm talked as if I were a little girl. And I'm like, "I'm sorry, but I'm not a little girl." And at that point I was like 27, 28. I was like, "um, no, we're not doing this this way."

Abby

Can I ask, where were your parents in all of this? Did they express worry about how you were handling it or disapproval?

Marlene

No, but also I don't talk about the family, so, I can't disclose any very interesting facts other than that they were like, "you're an adult, you do you." And they trust me. So that's fine.

Abby

Can I ask you just, is there any anger, or does anybody feel judged by you or anything like that?

Marlene

You would have to ask them, frankly. As far as I know, I get a lot of support from my family, frankly. I know a lot of wealthy people who try to do what I do in terms of speaking publicly about it and advocating for tax justice and they have struggles with their families. And so, I'm lucky like that.

Abby

Yeah. Now, your family has a long history of philanthropy. Was that something you were aware of when you were growing up?

Marlene

Somewhat, but not really, and I didn't really care that much for it. And also I don't care for it now because it really is just a fancy way to say "we have so much money that we can create legal structures that will forever finance our hobbies and things that we like and think are important."

I don't think society needs some wealthy people being like, "my hobby will be forever financed because I like classical music," and classical music, please don't take me wrong, is super fine and I want it well funded and financed and everything. People should be able to create this music and others should be able to listen to it and enjoy it and all of that.

But it shouldn't be dependent on the whims of a rich person.

Abby

Okay, so then I'm gonna ask you, and I apologize, because I find it to be a willfully stupid question, but it always is asked, "why don't you just give it all away, then?" Or, "just write a check to the government on your own, if you hate the money so much."

Marlene

I don't hate the money that much. The thing is money is, it's neither good nor bad. The way you use it shows what it is. Currently, worldwide, the way we use it is we distribute it so poorly that it becomes this motor for inequality. I'm not taxed. I will not be taxed on my wealth.

I wish I was. And I will do everything I can in order to advocate for that, because it's a democratic way to do it, and frankly that's the only respectful way to do it when you live in a society, because it acknowledges that we are equals. Political and justice-wise we are equals. But I will have to redistribute it, which is another fancy word for giving it away.

I will have to figure out how I do this because I'm not keeping it, it's not good if I keep it. I'm not gonna just wire it to our government because, I don't know if you follow Austrian politics, but it's god awful. It's really awful. And a government that is not able to create a tax system that taxes wealth properly, doesn't get a gift.

I will have them ask for this money with the according law system. Tax me, tax me now. I co-founded the association [taxmenow](#) to tell them what to do, but I'm not gonna just wire them my money. So, I have to figure out what I'm gonna do and how I'm gonna do it. I'm talking to a lot of people who are in this field.

I'm exploring ideas especially around participatory approaches in order to share the power because I don't see why a person like me should have this power. You wouldn't run around in the street and go to a random stranger and be like, "Hey, here's a double-digit multimillion sum, go play."

You wouldn't do that. But that's what happens when you inherit. You just have anybody out of the sperm lottery get cash and then go play. And I'm like, frankly, history has not proven this a good idea. The present is not proving this a good idea. The future won't prove this a good idea. So can we please stop this madness and tax inheritance.

Abby

Do you think people with money internalize an idea of themselves as more worthy?

Marlene

Hmm, that's an interesting question. When you have access to this sort of money and it becomes a job to deal with it, and either you do the job yourself or you pay someone to do it for you, then, of course the way this money will be treated, especially when it's tied to family history, will web itself into who you are and who you think you are, and it will become a part of your identity, which is also one of the reasons, as far as I can understand, for people who react aggressively against

taxation of wealth, because they feel like, if something threatens my money, then they threaten me.

And they find themselves threatened, when really what happens is, people, when they're being taxed on their wealth, are being asked to share like everybody else. So that with the shared money, we can create a public infrastructure, which frankly is the only sign for wealth in the country.

Freaking GDP. It doesn't show you anything. The state of the public infrastructure and the public services of a country will tell you about whether or not this is a wealthy country. This is the only metrics that matter.

And in order to fuel that, you need tax money. And why not be super proud and go, "the most democratic thing I can do is to pay my taxes" and then to, I don't know, take the subway if you're in a big city, or whatever else, go to the, I don't know, you don't have that kind of welfare state in the U.S., but, like healthcare treatment, in Austria, healthcare treatment. You go to school or university and it's for free.

All of this is because of the tax money. It's because of everybody paying their fair share. And so, this should be something where you let go of the wealth with pride instead of being threatened by it and scared.

Abby

So, to go back to what you were just saying about your government in Austria. And believe me, as much frustration as you feel with your government, I feel with my own, very obvious dysfunction, given the state of government, your enthusiasm for paying taxes is interesting.

I mean, how do you square one with the other? How do we fix the government where the money would be going?

Marlene

Yes. that's a good one. First of all, nobody gets asked whether or not they want to pay taxes other than wealthy people. That's one thing.

And the second thing is, even if governments use it poorly - I'm talking democratic governments, and even if they use it poorly - it's still better than to have it in the pocket of some freaking rich kid that is trying to go to Mars, you know?

It's still better spent if it is ill investment in public infrastructure, if it's not well done because you kind of blow it out of the window and it costs three times as much to build, I don't know, a hospital or something. I'd rather have this than to have rich people fly to Mars.

And the other thing is we can actually hold governments accountable in a democracy. We know about what happens. We don't even begin to know, and to

fathom, what happens when wealthy people use their money at will, because they're not held accountable. There's no transparency whatsoever.

We can demand transparency from governments. We can use democratic processes to influence the way they use the money. We have much more access, as a society, to how governments deal with money than to how rich people deal with money. And so, I think that is why I'm so adamant about taxes. It's not just because it's the just way to do it and the democratic way, but it's also safer.

It's much safer. And in terms of freedom and security, these two things have two things that have something in common. They only can grow when you share them. You can't grow freedom or security by hoarding them.

And this is one thing that so many wealthy people don't understand. They think the more they accumulate the the freer they will be and the more secure. But what they will feel is more anxiety, more seclusion and isolation, and it will not do the trick for them. I think taxation maybe can help resocialize and reintegrate wealthy people into society where they belong, because they pretend that they don't have to care because they can afford not to care.

But we shouldn't let them afford not to care. You know what I mean?

Abby

Yeah. Absolutely. And I was gonna say that it's always been the irony, to me, of wealth that the people that I know with the most money seem to be the least free, in part because they are haunted by a constant sense of insecurity, whether it's overt or unconscious.

The insecurity is about all the different people who want to take what you have or have plans for what you have or for you.

I could, so in my parents see this feeling of insecurity everywhere I looked.

Marlene

Yeah. But I have a theory about this because I like reading a lot and to me, one of the people that explained politics the best was Hannah Arendt. She explains that when you have, and I hope that I do this properly, and whoever knows better, please feel free to demolish me on not doing this well. So here goes, I have no degree in philosophy whatsoever, or in political studies.

So when you have larger groups of people in society, power emerges from them. And the way you then channel it needs to be legitimized by those who create this power, which is by society.

So what happens is democratic governments have legitimate power because we vote for these people and we want them to use this power in order to govern and to

do politics. But when you have excessive amount of wealth you also hold a lot of power.

The thing is, it's not legitimate. And the lack of legitimacy begs the question, why? Why do you have power if you don't have a mandate, you're not elected. Why? So either they will have to say, "well, I earned it," and then will have to invent a self-made millionaire myth, which, it's always a myth. You can't be self-made. It's impossible, because you need access to all of the public infrastructure at all times.

Abby

Exactly. Exactly. I also think patriarchy and male supremacy play into this, as well, because so many of the sort of worst offenders in the idea of one's own worth department are men who hold a lot of wealth and who take from that a message about their own savior capacities.

I always wondered if *Iron Man* was the worst thing anybody ever did, that film, because they made *Iron Man* as this fantasy of like this brilliant inventor scientist, wealthy, wealthy man who uses his wealth to save the world.

And then they told us that it was based on Elon Musk. Have you ever heard that?

Marlene

Yeah. My first thought right now was they just tell Elon Musk's story the way Elon Musk wants to be seen.

Abby

Yeah.

Marlene

But Ironman at least has friends that he talks to and who will talk smack back at him, the Avengers Group. I'm not a fan.

I can enjoy this kind of movie every once in a while, but frankly, I have such a hard time going into this heuristic thing.

But what I think is even worse is Batman.

Abby

Mm.

Marlene

Because what happens is he has a childhood trauma, he has this phobia of bats. So he thinks, "Hmm, Gotham City, where I live, is a city is doing really poorly. Why not run around in a costume of the thing that I'm afraid of so that others are afraid of this, as well?"

And I'm like, come on, are you serious?

At the same time, he's a billionaire rich kid. So what happens is he could just use his wealth to finance the complete public infrastructure and public services of Gotham City and be like, "I give it back because I owe this all to you." No wealth is possible without everybody else also contributing to this society. People that work in your company and everything, like, you can never make everything on your own.

Abby

Yeah, the fantasy of Batman is that he's the good rich guy. He's good in the sense that he knows the difference between a good guy and a bad guy, so he can be the judge and the jury. He gets to decide who he beats up. He only beats up the bad people. I mean, and there's no necessity of keeping him accountable because he's good.

And I think a lot of Americans have bought into this narrative that people have money, and therefore are good, and they have money because they are good, and that therefore we should just back off and let them decide.

And that's where this kind of massive social fantasy around saviorism comes from is this highly oversimplified idea of how social change works. Which is, it's the actions of an individual to redeem, rather than a collective enterprise.

Marlene

Yeah, this sense of entitlement is so dangerous, especially when you consider that if you look around yourself right now, the state of the whole world, all of the crises we have, and we have so many. That is the result of letting wealthy people do as they please.

So, we already, we're living in, this is living proof that it doesn't work, if you let rich people do as they please.

What more proof do you need?

Abby

Yeah, that's absolutely true. We have all the empirical evidence we could ever possibly want for it not working, and yet we keep doubling down on it. But that comes back to the fact that somehow, somewhere along the line, I feel like all effective resistance to the rich lobby kind of curled up and died.

There was a point, especially in the United States, around Supreme Court decisions that let money seep into the decision making. I wonder how we'll ever get our government back. I mean, is Austria as polluted by money in the political process as we are?

Marlene

No. For instance, like our parties, when you wanna donate to the party as a private person, you can't donate more than \$7,500.

So \$7,500 is the highest individual donation you can make, for instance, like things like that.

But you can still influence it, like either if you do it illegally, that's always an option, unfortunately, to people who think that they're entitled to getting their way.

We do have issues, because Austria is very, very small, you have 8, maybe 9 million people in Austria, and 2 million are in Vienna alone. Everybody knows everybody.

And so what happens, you have these exclusive circles of people with wealth and/or class privilege, and they stay among themselves. They use their connections to stay among themselves. And that happens a lot in Vienna.

So, we do have a hugely problematic political field. I don't see it as bad as in the U.S. but frankly, my view of the U.S. is also a very tragic one. I don't know how you can call it a democracy when you need money in order to run for office, because that already goes against the democratic idea.

I don't know how you feel about this. And especially when an Austrian person tells a U.S. person how things should run, that's always very problematic.

Abby

Yeah. No, we, like, problematic is not even anywhere near the word for the incredibly fucked up system we're working with right now, because what bothers me is that, you know, in a democracy, theoretically, the people rule. The people vote, the people decide. And yet somehow, year after year after year, the majority of people vote against their own self interest.

And I'm just wondering like, how in Austria then, can your political system be, you know, as unsatisfying to you as you say. What's standing in between the will of the people and a good political system?

Marlene

This is a complicated question, because, first of all, to think that voting will get you what you want is a very, very, very narrow view of how politics work.

What plays into this starts much earlier in the narrative field. What kind of narratives are normal and status quo wherever you live? What kind of media are you consuming?

Like, for instance, what kind of questions are normal questions and what kind of questions are freak questions?

For instance, I'm being asked a question why I wanna pay taxes as if it was a freak thing. But you could also ask the question to other rich kids that you invite to your show and ask, "why don't you want to pay taxes?" and make that the freak thing.

Like, what is the subtext of normality that you live in? But I think it's really, it's so complicated to get from voting to good political results, and the politicians also must start to get a spine that is not just a blocked colon that will keep them upright but they're full of shit. You know?

You must develop a spine and political will is such a rare currency. But we need it.

Abby: Yeah. Can I just say that that's the metaphor of the month for me right now: the spine that's not just a blocked colon. Thank you for that.

Marlene

I hope so, because it's a helpful picture, I find.

Abby

I'm going to remember that for a long time.

So, one of the things I'm in struggle with myself is where my money came from. Do the dollars that I live off of have some blood on them? I have been really wrestling mightily with what is being asked of me by that. There are ways in which the Disney company is run that I object to enormously, especially around the way they treat their employees.

There's only so much influence I can have, but I have this last name that gives me some clout, publicly speaking, and I can maybe have an impact that way.

So I'm going backwards and I'm reflecting on what is the source of this power I didn't ask for, money I didn't ask for, position I didn't ask for. And I wonder if there's a way for me to use that to change the way the money is made, change the corporate culture itself.

Have you ever thought about how you relate back to the source of your money? Have you ever wondered if you should play a role there?

Marlene

Of course. I think it's a question that is not being asked enough. I would like to have this question be one of the status quo questions to ask wealthy people: Where does your money come from? Like, *really*. Not "there's this self-made, old white dude myth that runs in the family." No, no, no, no, no.

Who do you exploit? Where do you still exploit people and the planet? Where do you extract capital from places where you shouldn't even set foot, because who the hell do you think you are?

That is a question that's really important in my case. Like the business that was sold in 1996-1997, Boehringer Mannheim, was a pharmaceutical company. It's troublesome. They got through World War II. Every company that gets through World War II in Austria and Germany must be scrutinized.

But also, before Boehringer Mannheim, there was this other company, BASF, which is now the biggest chemical company in the world, as far as I know. It was founded by my great, great, great, great grandfather or something, Friedrich Engelhorn in the 19th century.

I have nothing to do with that, but I still want to know what really happened. Like, what *really* happened, how did it really go down? I'm interested in knowing, understanding, and in saying, now that we know, let's never recreate whatever was bad, but let's only take, if there was something good, there might be, let's take this and learn from this.

But lay it out and also say that so many people are wealthy because they have blood on their money. I don't think that there is a single story where there's not a story of exploitation and be it that people are not paid properly for the work that they do and not recognized that their work is part of the wealth.

You can't create wealth without having a lot of people contribute to it. And why not share it with everybody? Why insist on the private ownership of whoever had the first idea? Your idea is worthless if you don't have scientists working on it, if you don't have people selling the products, making the products, doing the services, being in administration, making sure people are being employed and being paid well. All of these things are crucial to whatever idea you ever have.

Abby

Yeah, it's a two-part mechanism to look at the source of money. The first part being like, yes, understanding what happened and where possible making repair or reparation to make up or atone or whatever word you wanna use for what was done, but then going forward, to go forward better.

How do we change that? How do we change narratives? I mean, you've mentioned narratives a couple of times in terms of how we think about wealthy people and what we expect should happen and how freak a question it is to ask why you wanna pay your taxes. I always hate the way people treat that like a freak question.

How do we change these narratives?

Marlene

For instance, with taxes, we shouldn't treat it as if it was waste wasted money, but, to be like tax positivity, right?

Abby

I like that.

Marlene

Yeah, let's talk about tax, baby.

Abby

Baby.

Marlene

You know?

Abby

Yeah.

Marlene

But then there is like media, for instance, but also movies. We talked about superhero movies. There is no such thing as a tax superhero or a democracy superhero, yet. But, quite concretely, with taxes, I think what has been said is it's wasted money and governments are really bad and the state is so bad and it doesn't know what it is doing.

Who's the state? The state is everybody. We all are part of this because, as a society, we need to be run in a certain way. The state is just a body that can handle the infrastructure. So we do need it. Whether it's bad or not, well, that is how we make it. But we can't do without, we need it.

People that work in hospitals, people that work in schools, people that build streets and public transport system, all of these people are the state.

They are people, they're regular people. And how you treat them, a state really shows how a society interdiscriminates itself.

And I think the better we treat each other, the better the basis for all of us to be political beings. And in terms of taxes, to realize, yes, there is some things where I could pull out every strand of hair one by one, because I think, what the hell are you doing with tax money?

But we still need tax money. For all the bad that they do, they also do a lot of good. For instance, in Austria, the tax money that goes into redistribution helps lift 1 million people every year over the threshold of poverty. And even if they do poor stuff somewhere else, there's also good stuff that happens.

So we have to highlight the good stuff that comes. And we have to say tax positivity is a real thing.

Abby

Let me ask you this. How do you respond to the criticism, and I get this criticism constantly, that you're sanctimonious and you think you're better than everyone else, and you're, you know, the expression among the conservatives these days is virtue signaling.

Have you heard that one? Do you know that one?

Marlene

No, but we have similar stuff.

Abby

So how do you respond to that?

Marlene

Well, first of all, what would you rather signal, virtue or vice? Like, huh? I don't even get it. I don't even get how this is insulting. I'm like, I'm virtue signaling. Well, you're welcome.

Abby: Thank you. Yeah.

Marlene

The second thing is, wealth taxation is not just about getting money into government and into state structure, into public infrastructure. This is a great, great bonus, but it really is about redemocratizing power, because when wealth becomes power, you need to reduce this power or else you can't call yourself a democracy for much longer. Frankly, this is just how it is goes.

So in order to redemocratize it, you have to tax it away. What happens is also that you reduce the amount of potential harm that this person, that this rich kid can do. I'm talking specifically rich kids because I'm one, but it can also be a rich old person. It doesn't matter.

And so, yes, when people say that to me, it really just reflects that they realize how bad they are and they feel bad about this, and they want me to feel bad about telling them this is something that I think is problematic. But I also say, how about we fix it? And I also say, how about we fix it together?

Because I'm not saying, "Hey, I'm the rich kid who's now telling you how to tax wealth because I know so much. I'm saying, please, please, please, everybody, let's do this the democratic way." It will be rough. It will take ages.

Democracy is not a service, it is a freaking chore. And it needs all of our participation and it needs, especially for people like me to give up power and to give it back to so many people who have excluded themselves because they know that nobody takes care of them, and to now humbly invite them back in and say, we are so sorry.

Let's use this moment in order to redistribute, but also to restructure ourselves. I think really this is so important to acknowledge that people like I have to say sorry. Please, let's fix this together. But let's have this conversation. Let's talk about money. Let's talk about the elephant in the room. Let's talk about tax justice and wealth inequality.

Abby

Marlene, that is a beautiful way to end this. I couldn't agree with you more, and I just

can't thank you enough, for all that you're doing, and all that you're saying on behalf of a more just and fair society. I'm with you entirely. Thank you.

Marlene

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Abby

Find out more about the work Marlene is doing with taxmenow at taxmenow.eu.

Other organizations doing similar work include the Patriotic Millionaires, along with Resource Generation in the U.S., Resource Justice in the U.K., and Resource Movement in Canada.

If you want to see the American Dream and Other Fairytales, it's available on Amazon, and iTunes, and vudu. And we're hosting screenings across the country, so to find out if there's a screening near you, or to host a screening, please visit americandreamdoc.com. That's americandreamdoc.com.

Next week, I geek out with labor organizer, Erica Smiley:

You know, it's, um, and I'm gonna use an obscure word, but I know you know it, it's the legacy of Taylorism, right?

Smiley

Ah, Taylorism, look at you, Abby. Okay, now we're doing it. Okay, hold on. Let me get my seat. Let me get comfortable. Okay, here we go.

Abby

That's next week on All Ears.

You've been listening to All Ears with me, Abigail Disney. Our supervising producer is Alexis Pancrazi. Jake Frankenfield is our associate producer. Our engineer is Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme song. And our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes.

For Fork Office, the All Ears team is Angie Wang, Dominique Bouchard, Phil Nuxoll, Codey Young, and Cathie Camacho.

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