

# *Beef* Season 2: “The people in charge have made it impossible for us”

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The second season of the Netflix comedy-drama series *Beef* takes a critical look at some of the more grotesque aspects of American social life as it plays out among the upper echelons.

The first season followed the lives of two individuals (Steven Yeun and Ali Wong as Danny Cho and Amy Lau) whose lives start to fall apart after a “road rage” incident. While there were lively moments and features (communicated particularly through Yeun’s performance), most of the characters in the first series were insufferable, and the story itself never became very compelling from a broader human standpoint.

The latest, eight-episode season of *Beef* has no formal connection to the first. The story centers around people who work at, or belong to the Monte Vista Country Club, in the wealthy southern California enclave of Montecito.

Season 2 focuses primarily on two couples. Josh (Oscar Isaac) is the general manager and Lindsay (Carey Mulligan) an interior designer at the club. Despite outward appearances, their marriage is deeply unhappy. A bitter fight between the two takes place in the first episode over the various ways their middle-class existence and upward ambitions have made things stale and loveless between them.

Ashley (Cailee Spaeny) and Austin (Charles Melton), younger, part-time workers at the club, are engaged. A manager asks the pair to return Josh’s phone back to him, accidentally left at the club. Ashley and Austin arrive as the other couple are in the middle of the ugly quarrel. The younger couple, hearing shouts and screams from afar, start filming and catch Josh and Lindsay at each other’s throats. Ashley and Austin flee with the video.

Fearing their jobs and lifestyles are in danger from the video evidence, Josh attempts to bribe the younger couple in various ways, but to no avail. Things get more complicated when the new owner of the country club, the billionaire Chairwoman Park (Youn Yuh-jung), said to “account for two percent of South Korea’s GDP,” becomes responsible for Josh’s upcoming contract extension. Park has her own reasons for owning the club, including plans to use it as a money laundering operation and recruitment tool for the plastic surgery clinic of her second husband, Dr. Kim (the brilliant Song Kang-ho) back in South Korea.

A series of increasingly dramatic events takes the season through various twists and turns.

The scenes involving Ashley and Austin’s situation are perhaps the most compelling, and recognizable. Ashley has a terrible accident at the club which ultimately puts her ability to become

pregnant at risk. Neither she nor Austin have medical insurance and they are essentially helpless to resolve their situation. This sets in motion their plan to use the video of Josh and Lindsay to blackmail the latter into providing salaried jobs with health insurance.

As a result, Ashley becomes a new manager at the club, and Austin becomes a personal trainer, even though neither has qualifications for his or her position. Josh and Lindsay also develop new motivation to scam the club, “rediscovering” their lost passions.

However, Dr. Kim accidentally kills one of his plastic surgery patients on the operating table. The billionaire Park begins an aggressive cover-up operation for her husband, that ultimately involves blackmailing Josh.

The lives of both couples start to unravel in different ways as the scheming and desperation become more complex and intense. Austin develops a relationship with Park’s assistant, Eunice (Seoyeon Jang). They both eventually uncover the chairwoman’s effort to hide Dr. Kim’s crime. Everything concludes in a dramatic flurry at Park’s headquarters in South Korea.

Season 2 has obvious strengths. The acting, by and large, is very good and affecting. Yuh-jung (*Minari*) and Kang-ho (*Parasite*; *A Taxi Driver*; *Memories of a Murder*) are particularly memorable.

To his credit, series creator, co-director and co-writer Lee Sung Jin makes the pressures of capitalism and class society a persistent theme and source of crises in the series. The rich and upper middle class are presented as calculating, largely odious people—they operate with contempt for any rules and for those below them. The affluent kill without hesitation—even people within their own circles—to protect their wealth and social interests.

It becomes clear early in the series that the country club is meant to be a metaphor for capitalist society. Jin told the *LA Times* in April that he viewed the situation at the club as representative of the dismal opportunities facing younger generations:

*I thought: What a perfect metaphor for society right now. No matter how hard the Gen Z and millennials work, they’re never going to get to be members of this club because, as Austin says, “everyone grabbed the bag before they could.” That’s what made me want to set it at a Montecito country club.*

To this extent, as noted, the most intriguing parts of the series are bound up with the lives of the younger couple, Ashley and Austin. The dilemmas they face are mass problems for tens of millions—lack of healthcare, jobs that pay virtually nothing and lead nowhere, dim prospects for a better life or starting a family. Some of the dialogue, though cartoonish at times, makes clear they are up against large socio-economic forces:

[Austin] The system. The system is designed to make you feel despair. Like, the disparity is systemic. You know what I mean?

[Ashley] Like income inequality?

[Austin] Yes, exactly ... Look, what I'm trying to say is none of this is your fault, okay? The people in charge have made it impossible for us.

Later, after the couple blackmails Josh into giving Ashley a full-time job with healthcare, they realize—in an intriguing episode set mostly in an emergency ward—how little coverage most workers actually have for serious medical conditions.

Jin also told the *LA Times*:

*We certainly didn't set out to make a season about capitalism. But if you're constantly trying to chase truth as writers, I don't know how you say anything in the modern era, in 2026, and not have capitalism be a huge variable because it permeates every aspect of life. It's like going to get gas. Gas is almost \$7 right now. You have to fill your tank and there goes \$140? That's crazy. And relationships face so much stress—everyone is being hit by all these curveballs and trying to keep your head above water—how can you enjoy each other?*

*It became very obvious to us that if you're going to write a season about marriage and love to these two couples, financial implications have to be a big factor ... Everything's connected. We wanted to really show how that survival instinct, desperation, is starting to come for everyone.*

Toward the end of the season, Jin articulates the capitalist worship—and fraudulence—of individualism as the “natural” order of things through a speech by the corrupt Chairwoman Park:

Thank God we survived billions of years from tiny cell to bacteria to monkey because we only care about self. That is why capitalism works. It is a system of nature. System of the self. Love lives in this system. All relationships exist in this system.

Jin's instinct to indict the selfishness of capitalism and the rich

is a strength. But his understanding is limited.

Important questions arise in the series, but, in the end, they receive a too glancing treatment. A country club has its uses as a metaphor, but also its obvious restrictions. This is a rotten little world, dominated by the very rich. Hardly an all-encompassing image or embrace of society as a whole. The built-in parameters might help explain why too much of the second season follows the “inner life” and psychological turmoil of the nauseating, grasping Josh and Lindsay (though the actors do their best to make them human beings, particularly Isaac).

The most striking weaknesses emerge from the manner in which the series concludes. Ultimately, Austin and Ashley, the only decent people at the outset of Season 2, are sucked upward into the vicious and vacuous world of the aspiring upper middle-class. They take over the country club and appear to become the next Josh and Lindsay.

The billionaires literally get away with murder, and the audience is left with a living image of the Buddhist Sa's'ra,\* which Jin told interviewers is intended to communicate “the cycle of life” and “history repeating itself.” This is an unhelpful and even lazy outlook, and one, frankly, based in ignorance of history. Where do social revolutions fit into this supposedly endless repeated “cycle of life?” Has society truly not changed since the 6th or 5th century BCE?

The second season of *Beef* is an advance over the first. The instincts of the writers and creators are pointing in important directions. The present unprecedented state of political and social turmoil must have an impact on them, of one kind or another. One hopes it will compel them to pursue their urgent themes with even greater seriousness in the next season.

\*Sa's'ra in Buddhism is the beginning-less cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence and dying again.



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