Alternatives to Capitalism: What Happens After the Revolution?

Have we faced the harsh reality that, unless the inseparability between the dialectics of thought and of revolution does exist, any country that does succeed in its revolution may retrogress, since the world revolution cannot occur at one stroke everywhere and world capitalism continues to exist? …

[Lenin’s] *practice* of the dialectic of thought as well as of revolution underlined his call for a Third International.

– Raya Dunayevskaya, “Marxist-Humanist Perspectives, 1985-86”

I. Concretizing the Vision of a New Human Society

We live at a moment in which it is harder than ever to articulate a liberatory alternative to capitalism. As we all know, the collapse of state-capitalist regimes that called themselves “Communist,” as well as the widespread failures of social democracy to remake society, have given rise to a widespread acceptance of Margaret Thatcher’s TINA – the belief that “there is no alternative.”

Yet the difficulty in articulating a liberatory alternative is not mostly the product of these events. It is an inheritance from the past. To what extent has such an alternative ever been articulated? There has been a lot of progress – in theory and especially in practice – on the problem of forms of organization – but new organizational forms by themselves are not yet an alternative.
A great many leftists, even revolutionaries, did of course regard nationalized property and the State Plan, under the control of the “vanguard” Party, as socialism, or at least as the basis for a transition to socialism. But even before events refuted this notion, it represented, at best, an evasion of the problem. It was largely a matter of leftists with authoritarian personalities subordinating themselves and others to institutions and power with a blind faith that substituted for thought. How such institutions and such power would result in human liberation was never made clear. Vague references to “transition” were used to wave the problem away.

Yet as Marxist-Humanism has stressed for more than a decade, the anti-Stalinist left is also partly responsible for the crisis in thought. It, too, failed to articulate a liberatory alternative, offering in place of private- and state-capitalism little more than what Hegel (Science of Logic, Miller trans., pp. 841-42) called “the empty negative … a presumed absolute”:

The impatience that insists merely on getting beyond the determinate … and finding itself immediately in the absolute, has before it as cognition nothing but the empty negative, the abstract infinite; in other words, a presumed absolute, that is presumed because it is not posited, not grasped; grasped it can only be through the mediation of cognition … .

The question that confronts us nowadays is whether we can do better. Is it possible to make the vision of a new human society more concrete and determinate than it now is, through the mediation of cognition?

According to a long-standing view in the movement, it is not possible. The character of the new society can only be concretized by practice alone, in the course of trying to remake society. Yet if this is true, we are faced with a vicious circle from which there seems to be no escape, because acceptance of TINA is creating barriers in practice. In the perceived absence of
an alternative, practical struggles have proven to be self-limiting at best. They stop short of even trying to remake society totally – and for good reason. As Bertell Ollman has noted (Introduction to Market Socialism: The Debate among Socialists, Routledge, 1998, p. 1), “People who believe [that there is no alternative] will put up with almost any degree of suffering. Why bother to struggle for a change that cannot be? … people [need to] have a good reason for choosing one path into the future rather than another.”

Thus the reason of the masses is posing a new challenge to the movement from theory. When masses of people require reasons before they act, a new human society surely cannot arise through spontaneous action alone. And exposing the ills of existing society does not provide sufficient reason for action when what is at issue is the very possibility of an alternative. If the movement from theory is to respond adequately to the challenge arising from below, it is necessary to abandon the presupposition – and it seems to me to be no more than a presupposition – that the vision of the new society cannot be concretized through the mediation of cognition. We need to take seriously Raya Dunayevskaya’s (Power of Negativity [PON], p. 184) claim in her Hegel Society of America paper that “There is no trap in thought. Though it is finite, it breaks through the barriers of the given, reaches out, if not to infinity, surely beyond the historic moment” (RD, PON, p. 184). This, too, is a presupposition that can be “proved” or “disproved” only in the light of the results it yields. In the meantime, the challenges from below require us to proceed on its basis.

II. The Problem of “Blueprints”

Neglect is not the only reason why revolutionaries have failed to concretize the vision of the new society. Many have opposed and continue to oppose this perspective on the ground that
we should not draw up “blueprints for the future.” And many invoke Marx’s name on behalf of this position. It is true that he rejected such blueprints, but precisely what was he rejecting, and why?

Talk of “blueprints” is often careless. It is important to recall that Marx was grappling with some honest-to-goodness blueprints of a future society. Fourier, for instance, stipulated how large each community (Phalanx) will be, how it will be laid out, how people will dine and with whom they will sit, and who will do the dirty work (a legion of “youngsters aged nine to sixteen, composed of one-third girls, two-thirds boys”). There is a great chasm between such blueprints, which Marx rejected, and what Dunayevskaya, in her final presentation on the dialectics of organization and philosophy, called “a general view of where we’re headed.” As Olga’s report suggests, the difference is not essentially a matter of the degree of generality, but a matter of the self-development of the idea.

Dunayevskaya wrote that once Capital was finished and Marx was faced with the Gotha Program in 1875, “There [was] no way now, now matter how Marx kept from trying to give any blueprints for the future, not to develop a general view of where we’re headed for the day after the conquest of power, the day after we have rid ourselves of the birthmarks of capitalism” (PON, p. 5). Nor did Marx remain silent about this issue until that moment. For instance, in this year’s classes on “Alternatives to Capitalism,” we read the following statement in his 1847 Poverty of Philosophy (POP). “In a future society, in which … there will no longer be any classes, use will no longer be determined by the minimum time of production, but the time of production devoted to different articles will be determined by the degree of their social utility.”

Even more important than Marx’s explicit statements about the new society is the overall thrust of his critique of political economy. Although it is true that he devoted his theoretical
energy to “the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes … for the cook-
shops of the future” (Postface to 2nd ed. of Capital), critique as he practiced it was not mere
negative social criticism. It was a road toward the positive. He helped clarify what capital is and
how it operates, and he showed that leftist alternatives will fail if they challenge only the
system’s outward manifestations rather than capital itself. By doing this, he helped to clarify
what the new society must not and cannot be like – which is already to tell us a good deal about
what it must and will be like. “All negation is determination” (Marx, draft of Vol. II of Capital).

I believe that there are two reasons why Marx rejected blueprints for the future. As this
year’s classes emphasized, one reason is that he regarded the utopian socialists’ schemes as not
“utopian” enough. They were sanitized and idealized versions of existing capitalism: “the
determination of value by labor time – the formula M. Proudhon gives us as the regenerating
formula of the future – is therefore merely the scientific expression of the economic relations of
present-day society” (Marx, POP, Ch. 1, sect. 2). But this simply means that Marx rejected a
particular kind of attempt to concretize the vision of the new society, not that he rejected the task
itself.

The other reason was that Marx, who aligned himself with the real movement of the
masses, held the utopians’ schemes to be obsolete, or worse, once the working class was moving
in another direction. I believe that this perspective remains valid, but that the subjective-
objective situation has changed radically. Today, “what masses of people are hungering for[,] but
which radical theoreticians and parties are doing little to address[, is] the projection of a
comprehensive alternative to existing society,” as we stated in our 2003-04 Marxist-Humanist
Perspectives thesis. Two months ago, Anne Jaclard spoke to a class of college youth. Many of
them were eager for a concrete, well articulated vision of a liberatory alternative to capitalism,
and they rejected the notion that its concretization should be put off to the future. Visitors to our classes, and participants in the “Alternatives to Capital” seminar on Capital in New York, have also demanded greater concreteness. How do we align with this real movement from below? Given the direction in which the masses’ thinking is moving, hasn’t resistance to concretizing a liberatory alternative become obsolete?

I do not mean to imply that we should accommodate demands for easy answers. Like the Proudhonists and utopian socialists with whom Marx contended, many folks seem to think that concretizing an alternative to capitalism is simply a matter of articulating goals and then implementing them when the time comes. What we need to do when easy answers are demanded, I think, is convey the lessons we have learned – that the desirability of proposed alternatives means nothing if they give rise to unintended consequences that make them unsustainable, that political change flows from changes in the mode of production, and so forth – while also saying that which can be said about the new society, as concretely as it can be said.

Resistance to concretizing a liberatory alternative to capitalism has been and continues to be defended principally in the name of anti-vanguardism. An anarcho-syndicalist named “marko” recently put forth this argument in opposition to Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel’s “parecon” (participatory economics): “Anarcho-Syndicalism demands that the detailed thinking about a future economy is to be decided by the liberated working class itself, not by a prior group of intellectuals. That is working class ‘self-emancipation’.”¹ In our own organization, a member of the clique that abandoned Marxist-Humanism put forth a very similar argument. It has sometimes been suggested that Marx rejected blueprints for the same reason, but I know of no evidence for this. The evidence sketched out above indicates that he labored to concretize a

liberatory alternative to capitalism throughout his life, and did not regard this work as antithetical to working-class self-emancipation.

In any case, marko confuses and conflates thinking with policy-making in a quite telling way. It is generally unfair to nitpick at unknown authors’ internet posts, but marko’s phraseology – “detailed thinking about the future economy is to be decided” – is too peculiar to be merely an accidental slip. All proponents of workers’ self-emancipation agree that the policies of the future economy are to be decided upon by the working people themselves, but thinking simply cannot be shoehorned into the old problematic of “who decides?” Once again, a well-meaning attempt to posit spontaneity as the absolute opposite of vanguardist elitism ends up by placing the entire burden of working out a liberatory alternative to capitalism on the backs of the masses. And the newly liberated masses must somehow do this from scratch, having been deprived of the ability to learn from the theoretical achievements and mistakes of prior generations.

I do think there are limits to what can be worked out in advance. In part, we face limits because we are the products of this society, not the new human beings that might emerge in a free society. But this does not imply that concretization of the vision of the new society is a task that can be foisted onto future generations. The new society will either begin to be created by human beings who are themselves the creations of capitalism, or it will not be created at all. That is simply an inescapable fact.

Because there are limits to how concretely the vision of the new society can be worked out in advance, we cannot give a blueprint for the future. But, as Dunayevskaya (quoted in Intro. to PON, p. xxxviii) wrote shortly before her death, “The fact that we cannot give a blueprint does not absolve us from the task. It only makes it more difficult.” The task is indeed extraordinarily difficult, but I think we have made a good beginning as an organization in tackling it, and we
should build upon that achievement. During the last two months, there has been a growing recognition in this organization that our inability to give a blueprint does not absolve us from the task. I think it would be a mistake to now try to find something else that does absolve us from the task.

III. The Problem of “Transition”

Identifying ultimate goals seems to be the easiest part of articulating a liberatory alternative to capitalism. The more we move back in time, towards the day after the revolution and what happens then, the more difficult the problems seem to be. I suggested earlier that many on the left engaged in a lot of loose talk and loose thought about “transitional societies” not only as a cover for state-capitalist despotism, but in order to wave these problems away. Unfortunately, the problems seem to be so difficult that the tendency to wave them away by invoking the notion of transition still remains strong.

The 1998 volume *Market Socialism: The Debate Among Socialists* (New York and London: Routledge) contains contributions by David Schweikart and James Lawler in favor of “market socialism,” and contributions by Hillel Ticktin and Bertell Ollman against it. Ticktin and Ollman offer standard, but nonetheless strong, arguments as to why market socialism is neither workable nor a road forward to genuine socialism. As Ollman (p. 120) succinctly puts it, the market is not like a can opener that we manipulate, but like a meat grinder that “manipulates us, and worse.”

Unfortunately, however, the two sides are not all that far apart. Ticktin (p. 64) accepts the need for an entire “historical period between capitalism and socialism” during which “the market would continue” until it is gradually phased out. Similarly, Ollman (pp. 116-17) writes that “the
first few decades after the socialist revolution can best be understood as a transition to socialism.” Market allocation will exist during these decades of transition, as will “a substantial private sector” and “people who will be allowed to take from what society produces according to their property and not according to their work.”

As Schweikart and Lawler are quick to point out, these are fatal concessions to their position. When Ollman asks how market socialism, “awash with alienation,” could possibly prepare the way for communism, Lawler (p. 184) writes, “I have the right to ask him the same question.” And if Ollman can imagine that communism awaits us on the other end of several decades during which “market production, and even capitalist market production, continues to exist,” then “the supposedly omnivorous logic of the market” must not be so omnivorous after all (Lawler p. 144).

How can he and Ticktin fall prey to such glaring contradictions? Schweikart (p. 171, emphasis added) pinpoints the source of the problem: “they have no alternative to propose for the period immediately following the accession to power of a socialist government.” Unwilling to

2 Both Ollman (p. 116) and Lawler (pp. 24-26) claim that Marx also recognized the need for a transitional market society, citing the immediate measures that the Communist Manifesto proposed in order to encroach on “the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production.” Lawler (pp. 42-43) also claims that Marx accepted that a transitional market-socialist society would precede the first, lower phase of communism by writing that “Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other” (“Critique of the Gotha Program” (CGP)). Had Marx said that the weeds in his garden need to be pulled up, Lawler would apparently construe this as sanctioning a transitional period of weeds. In any case, he ignores the fact that the CGP states – twice – that the first phase of communist society emerges from capitalist society.
accept the permanence of capitalism, but lacking an alternative to market socialism, they simply have no choice; they must believe that market socialism will somehow prove to be a feasible stepping-stone to genuine socialism, even though they themselves have told us it cannot.

Albert and Hahnel’s parecon is the product of a great deal more thought and reflection, 13-year’s worth at least (see www.parecon.org for numerous books, articles, etc.). I am not fully convinced that Parecon is feasible. Yet it is an achievement nonetheless, something to learn from and build upon. It seems to me to be by far the most successful attempt yet to articulate a concrete and feasible vision of what Marx called the lower phase of communism – even though Albert has recently pooh-poohed the idea that the higher phase of communism is possible.

Parecon is a vision of a democratic society without value production, the commodification of labor-power, markets, or money, and with little if any division between mental and manual labor.

Parecon can look like a blueprint spun out of the heads of two intellectuals, but I think this is largely due to Albert and Hahnel’s tendency to give us their conclusions rather than exhibiting the process of thinking that led them to these conclusions. In fact, the specificity of parecon results largely from their attempt to work through the tensions and contradictions that arise when one thinks about how to break the logic of capital. Their purpose, it seems to me, is not to build castles in the air, but to formulate an alternative that will not revert back to capitalism because it has its own self-sustaining logic.

This is a considerable advance over the many attempts to articulate a liberatory vision that consist almost exclusively of proposals about who will make decisions and how. Such proposals presume that politics can be in command, inverting the relationship between the

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1 See “Albert Rejoins 1” (www.zmag.org/rejoin1albstaud.htm) and other contributions by Albert in his debate with Peter Staudenmaier at www.zmag.org/debatelibmuni.htm.
political realm and the mode of production, and ignoring the problem of unintended consequences.

Yet parecon, as Albert and Hahnel are aware, is only a model of how a non-capitalist economy might function once all the elements are in place and the new society is standing on its own feet. The problem of what happens the day after the revolution remains. They have very little to say about that, and what they do say is not very encouraging. It is mostly a matter of mobilizing people for social change and institution-building, plus some “prefiguring” of new social relations in the present. Talk of “a democratically elected government hav[ing] a mandate to set up a participatory economy” makes one suspect that they have not fully broken with the notion that politics can be in command. Or perhaps they simply do not have a vision of the road to take on the day after.

Nor do I have much to offer, except to say that I have increasingly come to suspect that the very idea of “transitional society” is incoherent, and seems to stand in the way of thinking things through clearly. Hegel’s critique of the idea of gradualness (Science of Logic, Miller trans., pp. 334-36, pp. 368-71) seems relevant here. Since Lenin, left thinkers have discussed this critique mostly in relation to revolution vs. evolution. But Hegel says that what applies to “coming-to-be” applies equally to “ceasing-to-be,” so I think his critique is relevant also to the idea that capitalism ceases-to-be through a gradual period of transition.

Hegel argues that change is conceived of as gradual in order to create a palpable image, “to make it possible almost to watch the disappearing with one’s eyes.” Change is thereby supposedly reduced to the easily understood process of mere quantitative decay, withering away. Yet this image in fact explains nothing, since what requires explanation is the essential character

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of the change, which is not gradual quantitative decrease, but the “abstract transition of an existence into a negation of the existence” (p. 335). Appeals to gradualness evade the need to explain this by assuming the problem away: “with the gradual disappearance of something, the non-being[,] or the other which takes its place[,] is likewise assumed to be [already] really there, but not yet observable, … not in the sense of being implicitly or ideally contained in the first something, but really there” (p. 370).

It seems to me that Ticktin and Ollman fall prey to this critique. Instead of theorizing the negation of existing capitalism, they assume that it withers away as a socialist economy takes its place. Similarly, Albert and Hahnel seem to assume that parecon can be “really there” already the day after the revolution, in the form of participatory economic and political institutions that are ready to take over.

The difference between the gradual withering away of the state envisioned by Marx and Engels, and the gradual withering away of capitalism during a transition period, has to do with the difference between the political and the economic. Political domination is rooted in class antagonism, which in turn is rooted in the mode of production. The withering away of the state is intelligible because it is predicated on the revolutionary transformation of the mode of production. But capitalism is a mode of production. The idea of withering away seems unintelligible here; upon what does a mode of production depend that would cause it to wither away?

I believe that Dunayevskaya’s 1953 letters on Hegel’s Absolutes may prove helpful in thinking through this problem, for she breaks with the logic of transition, replacing it with “the Idea freely releas[ing] itself.” The context of that discussion differs slightly from the present context, but that should not deter us, since Hegel’s original context is quite different from both of
them. If “[r]evolutionary transcendence is immanent in the very form of thought” (Dunayevskaya, *PON*, p. 185), then the dialectic of thought is relevant to all questions of revolutionary transcendence.

In the May 12 letter, Dunayevskaya (*PON*, p. 22) quotes the passage from Hegel I quoted earlier, on the “empty negative, the abstract infinite … a presumed absolute.” She then says “we have come to where we part from Lenin.” He interpreted the end of Hegel’s *Logic* as a “transition to … Nature,” which Dunayevskaya seems to construe as implying that practice, or perhaps objective development, is what concretizes the Absolute, realizes the notion of the new society. She then notes that, on the contrary, Hegel went on to clarify that the passage of the Notion into reality is *not* a transition, but an “absolute liberation”:

> [The unification of the Notion and reality] has not *issued from a process of becoming*, nor is it a *transition*, […] but an absolute *liberation*. … [I]n this freedom, therefore, no transition takes place. … The passage [of the Notion into reality] is therefore to be understood here rather in this manner, that the idea *freely releases* itself …. [Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Miller trans., p. 843]

Lenin dismissed this clarification as unimportant, Dunayevskaya (*PON*, p. 22) argued, because he “didn’t have Stalinism to overcome” and therefore “transitions, revolutions[,] seemed sufficient to bring the new society.” But when “the totalitarian one-party state [is what] must be overcome”, there is a need for “a totally new revolt in which everyone experiences ‘absolute liberation’” (Dunayevskaya, *PON*, p. 22).

Again, the context of the current discussion is *slightly* different from this. Yet the contrast between transitions and free release seems relevant nonetheless. The logic of capital is “omnivorous,” totalizing. Capitalism therefore cannot “become” a new society; it cannot
gradually cease-to-be as the new society comes-to-be. Is it not the case, then, that revolutionary transformation can only be *comprehended* as absolute liberation that begins *the day after* the revolution, rather than as gradual transition?

IV. Indirectly vs. Directly Social Labor

This does *not* mean that the new society can emerge full-blown from nothing; what is at issue is rather the new society developing on its *own* new foundations rather than becoming-through-another. In the CGP, Marx was careful to stress that the higher phase of communism can come only at the end of a long, hard road, and that the new society will still be very defective on the day after the revolution, “when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society.” Yet I think that there is an important sense in which he theorized this emergence as an absolute liberation rather than as a transition. I refer to his notion that people will be remunerated in accordance with the amount of work they do, from the very start.

It is easy to read this as a middle-aged man throwing in the towel after having come up empty. Marx seems to be repeating the very proposal that he had excoriated for more than a quarter-century when it was made by Bray, Gray, Proudhon, and Darimon. I do not think this is so, however. They were trying to institute equal exchange in a society dominated by the law of value, while Marx was theorizing a society in which that law has been abolished. Whereas the commodification of labor-power is, in Marx’s view, the defining characteristic of capitalism, the CGP projects an absolute liberation from wage-slavery (the commodification of labor-power), beginning at the very start of communist society.

As Marx continually emphasized, from his 1847 POP through the 1875 CGP, although the law of value appears to be a law of equality, it is actually a law of inequality. It seems to be a
law of equality because, if the same amount of labor is needed to produce two different products, and if exchange takes place in accordance with the law of value, then one unit of the first product will exchange for one unit of the second. It thus seems that if the law of value were really in operation, as the Proudhonists and utopian socialists urged, the workers who produced these products would each get back, in a different physical form, exactly what each contributed. Equality would reign, in the sense that equal contributions – equal amounts of work – would result in equal rewards.

The catch is that, according to the law of value itself, what tends to exchange one-for-one are the products of equal amounts of social labor, but the individual’s labor is not directly social. It counts as social labor only if it measures up to the average. Only the average, or socially necessary, amount of labor needed to produce something counts as value-creating; any extra time that was spent to produce it has been wasted.

What the Proudhonists and utopian socialists completely failed to recognize was that this is no infringement upon the law of value, but the way the law must operate. Even a modicum of efficiency under capitalist production requires it. Equal amounts of clock-hour labor yield drastically unequal results. Some workers are more productive, others are less productive. Some work at more-skilled jobs, others at less-skilled jobs. Some work with cutting-edge equipment, other with antiquated equipment. And so on. Capitalism could not function at all efficiently if these unequal hours of labor counted as equal. More efficient labor must count as more labor, while less efficient labor must count as less labor. So the law of value, understood as a law of equal exchange, is an abstract law. It refers only to the abstract average hour of labor, and does not hold in the concrete, individual case. The labor of all men and women is “equal,” but some is “more equal” than others.
Now in the CGP – after a nearly 30-year span of theoretical work on the issue – Marx says that this, precisely this, is what will be different in communist society, from the very start. The higher phase of communism is not immediately achievable, but what is immediately achievable is the remuneration of people according to the actual amount of work they do. One person’s hour of labor will count as equal to every other person’s hour of labor. “The same amount of work which [a worker] has given to society in one form, he receives back in another” (Marx, CGP).

This differs from the Proudhonist-utopian proposals for equal exchange, because they were proposals for what to do in a commodity-producing society, and in such a society “the exchange of equivalents … exists only on the average and not in the individual case” (ibid.). What will be different about the new society, even as it has just emerged from capitalist society, is that equivalent exchange will indeed exist in the individual case; “principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads” (ibid.) The individual’s labor will be directly social. No one’s labor-hour is “more equal” than another’s any longer.

When Stalinism revised the law of value in 1943, the slogan “distribution according to labor” was put forth. Dunayevskaya split this equivocal formula in two, along class lines. The Stalinists were not offering to remunerate workers according to the actual amount of time they worked. That would be the case in a socialist society that has just emerged from capitalism – according to Marx as interpreted by Dunayevskaya. Instead, the Stalinists conceived of “labor” as something highly unequal, “highly differentiated according to degree of skill and as regards intellectual and physical differences” (Dunayevskaya, MHTSC, p. 84), and to be remunerated accordingly. That is how it is and must be – in a capitalist, commodity-producing society.
Marx projected the direct sociality of the individual’s labor as an interim goal. Equal remuneration was not the goal, but the *effect* of, and a measure of, the direct sociality of labor. Marx did not spell out what must be changed in order for the goal to be achieved, in order for directly social labor to be a sustainable reality. It is not something one can impose by fiat or by passing a law. Again, lasting changes in the political realm must be grounded in changes in the mode of production, not the reverse. So one of the most fundamental tasks we face today, I believe, is to work out how to create the social conditions such that each hour of labor will really count as equal – beginning on the day after the revolution.