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World revolution or socialism, community by community, in the Anthropocene?

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ABSTRACT

The idea of a Fifth International has been around for some time and the historical record is not encouraging. We have all been wrestling with the contradictions the Left faces. The transnational capitalist class has taken setbacks in its stride, while the Left flounders almost everywhere. No communist revolution has resulted in the capture of power by the working class. Now we are all confronted by a new, rapidly unfolding ecological crisis, the Anthropocene. I argue that the most effective response is to exit rather than attempt to overthrow capitalism and the hierarchical state by international revolution. Socialists in positions of authority in state institutions and capitalist enterprises can facilitate this process by enacting legislation that helps people to transition to new smaller-scale non-statist social units, such as producer-consumer co-operatives producing their own food and other essential services over time. Mobilizing the ideas of degrowth, anarching, and consumer-producer cooperatives in the digital age, I argue that under Anthropocene conditions democratic socialism is best constructed from the bottom up, community by community, networked in mutually nurturing relationships.

KEYWORDS

Socialist revolution;
Anthropocene; transnational
capitalist class; state;
producer-consumer
co-operatives

Samir Amin, a leading scholar and co-founder of the world-systems tradition, died on August 12, 2018. Just before his death, he published, along with close allies, a call for ‘workers and the people’ to establish a ‘fifth international’ [<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-intent-inaugural-meeting-international-workers-and-peoples>] to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin’s invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present readers with a selection of essays responding to Amin’s final message for today’s anti-systemic movements. This forum is being co-published between Globalizations [<https://www.tandfonline.com/rglo>], the Journal of World-Systems Research [<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/75>] and Pambazuka News [<https://www.pambazuka.org/>]. Additional essays and commentary can be found in these outlets.

The idea of a Fifth International has been around for some time and the historical record is not encouraging. For the past few years I have been wrestling with an apparent contradiction in the work of all of us on the Left. On the one hand, our research demonstrates how powerful and successful consumerist capitalism and its integral system of ‘nation-states’ has been, never more so than in its current neoliberal/social democratic forms (by which I mean ‘New Labour’ in the UK and

elsewhere). But despite the financial meltdowns in Asia and the EU/USA in the new millennium that were supposed to fatally weaken capitalist hegemony, the system seems chaotically stronger than ever. The transnational capitalist class has taken these setbacks in its stride.

On the other hand, we also argue that workers' movements all over the world can unite to challenge and overthrow the capitalist system. The very term 'International' implies that these revolutions will be organised within the frameworks of those thoroughly discredited 'nation-states' which work well for an increasingly smaller proportion of their populations. So, that's why I have lost faith (this word is deliberately chosen) in the idea of a Socialist International directed towards world revolution. The recent IPCC report on climate change indicates that the capitalist system has lost its way, with even more disastrous potential circumstances (rather fudged in the report). The only way out of this mess, the only chance of having a liveable planet for the generations to come (however utopian and unrealistic it sounds) is to organise small-scale socialist communities to create new forms of less destructive and less hierarchical economic and social relations. However unlikely, this is most likely to succeed community by community in something like producer-consumer cooperatives. My proposals are intended for the long-term and I am only too aware of the 'socialism or barbarism' argument. My critique of the Fifth International idea mainly focusses on the issue of 'what sort of socialism?'

The present dire state of civilization at the global level has been debated *ad nauseum*. Explanations abound – going all the way from flaws in human nature, to misinterpretations of the revealed word of 'God'. What we might call political-economy solutions to these problems are all variations on four main themes. First, capitalist ideologues argue that only free markets and more prosperity will eventually ensure peace and happiness for those who are prepared to work hard; second, caring capitalists and social democrats argue that capitalism can be reformed through welfare states to provide equality of opportunity, again for those who are prepared to work hard; third, progressive anti-capitalists (of various communist or socialist persuasions) argue that the capitalist state must be replaced by a workers' state, again to provide equality of opportunity for those who are prepared to work hard; and fourth, small groups of people argue that it is precisely capitalism (especially in its globalizing forms) and the hierarchical state apparatuses it has created that are at the root of the problem, and that we have to start thinking about what comes after capitalism and the state-form of society if we are to save the planet, eliminate poverty, and find happiness. The difficulty of achieving these worthy goals has gained extra urgency in the new millennium with the identification of the Anthropocene, human-driven (but not by all humans equally in our class-polarised world) potentially catastrophic change in the Earth system. Climate change is only one part of a series of interlocking eco-system problems that are threatening to destroy the conditions that support life on the planet, including human life.

I use the term 'hierarchic state' deliberately in a historically materialist sense to indicate the extent to which capitalism as a mode of production and a totalizing social system has colonised all actually existing states (even self-styled socialist or communist states). The hierarchic tendencies of officialdom and elected office are hard-wired into the state form of society. States cannot be anything but hierarchic and so attempts to reform states fundamentally from within are bound to fail. And this implies that attempts to reform capitalism fundamentally from within are also bound to fail. The best that progressive social movements and elected socialist state actors can do is to help provide spaces for those who wish to live outside the capitalist market and the state – to help and not to hinder them.

Most political-economy solutions for the failures of capitalism cannot deal with the two main fatal flaws of capitalism. The first is the crisis of class polarization – the rich get richer, the poor are always

with us, those in the middle (the precariat) are increasingly insecure. The migrant ‘crisis’ (now being intensified by a looming crisis of ‘climate refugees’), is a vivid reminder that the poor cannot necessarily be relied upon to put up with their misery passively forever in the places where they happen to be born. The second fatal flaw of capitalism is ecological unsustainability, now powerfully expressed in terms of the Anthropocene stage of the planet and its destructive fossil fuel driven growth economy. This is starkly exposed by Ian Angus in his book *Facing the Anthropocene* that connects the impetus of capitalist globalization with the very survival of human life on the planet – best theorised as ecocide. Though there are already several different interpretations of the Anthropocene (e.g. geological, materialist, idealist, feminist, postmodernist) most see it as a dire threat to humanity and the future of the planet. In my view the Anthropocene is mainly driven by the tremendous productive capacity of capitalist globalization and the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’. If the predictions of the Anthropocene scientists are correct we must start to think about what comes after capitalism in its various guises and how to achieve something better than capitalist globalization and the international system of hierarchical states that are locked into an endless cycle of growth obsessions and hot and cold wars.¹

What is to be done?

Marx and then Lenin’s answer to this question resulted in some defining moments of the 20th century. But there was always something perverse about the Marxist critique of state power as the executive committee of the capitalist class, and the eagerness with which so-called Communist revolutionaries seized and used state power. What it definitely did not lead to was the capture of power by the working class. The historical record, uneven as it is, strongly suggests that the dictatorship of the proletariat (however defined) cannot produce the withering away of the state. On the contrary, it usually led to a ‘new class’ of state bureaucrats and Soviet, Chinese and other profoundly undemocratic regimes. When ‘communism’ collapsed in the 1990s as an alternative vision of social and economic progress, it seemed inevitable that what I and others have conceptualized as the transnational capitalist class (TCC) would consolidate power on a global scale. The TCC and its four complementary fractions of corporate, political, technical, and consumerist elites, drive capitalist globalization. The globalizing political fraction of the hierarchic states, working hand-in-glove with the rest of the TCC, are part of the problem, not the solution.

The values on which a socialist global society could be built already exist in principle, but are rarely to be seen in practice, precisely because they conflict with the necessities of capitalist globalization. This can be represented in a series of dichotomies: principles of teamwork and cooperation vs. practices of self-centred individualism and ruthless competition; principles of stewardship of the planet for the common good vs. reckless exploitation of nature for private profit; principles of international friendship and aid vs. practices of cynical diplomacy and imperialist exploitation; principles of genuine corporate social responsibility vs. practices of corporate crime and profiteering and principles of the dignity of labour and the revaluation of labour itself vs. practices of the ‘race to the bottom’ and class polarization. Reformers and revolutionaries have been trying to shore up socialist principles and practices for over a century, and though millions of people have been dragged out of poverty and hunger in some parts of the world, arguably the global situation today is as bad as it has ever been. That is why we have to abandon the hope of challenging the hegemonic alliance of capital with the state and look for other answers. Putting all our energies into either world socialist revolution or socialism in one country increasingly appear to be self-defeating strategies.

Alternatives to capitalist globalization

Is there a non-capitalist alternative to capitalist globalization? There is and a good place to start is by repeating the aphorism: 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world, than to imagine the end of capitalism'. Whoever actually said this first, it expresses a profound truth about the era of capitalist globalization. Theories of capitalist hegemony, from their origins in Marx, through Gramsci, Althusser (repressive/ideological state apparatuses), Marcuse and the culture industries thesis of the Frankfurt School certainly help to explain why it has been easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. So, we have to begin again to think through what we once conceptualized as democratic socialism and what it might look like in the 21st century.

The power of capitalist hegemony today is so overwhelming (allied as it is with the military and police powers of states) that the only viable strategy for change is a process of negating, avoiding, and eventually consigning capitalism and the state to the dustbin of history. The digital revolution provides simultaneously powerful tools of capitalist exploitation and a means of changing the system. The transnational capitalist class, to put it bluntly, systematically subverts the emancipatory potential of generic globalization, by which I mean the electronic revolution, critical postcolonialisms, and new forms of cosmopolitanism. The electronic revolution could also contribute to dealing with one of the central structural problems of the state in capitalist society, namely the question of size. In 1973 E.F. Schumacher published a not-quite forgotten book, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, challenging many of the orthodoxies of capitalist and socialist economics, notably the obsession with growth. For this he was called a crank. Schumacher's response (on the BBC) to critics was characteristic: 'What's wrong with a crank? It's a small instrument, very simple, it does not involve great capital investment, it is a relatively non-violent technology, and it causes revolutions'.²

Huge transnational corporations and huge corporate states, serviced by huge professional and consumer goods and services organizations increasingly dominate the lives of people everywhere with destructive consequences at the individual, community, and planetary levels, so it seems obvious that smaller scale structures might possibly work better to enable people to live happier and more fulfilling lives. My vision of an alternative, radical, progressive, socialist globalization is based on networks of relatively small producer-consumer co-operatives (P-CC) co-operating at a variety of levels to accomplish a variety of societal tasks. Why producer and consumer cooperatives? This, I would argue, is the only way for us to re-connect with nature, to create communities where everyone assumes responsibility to a greater or lesser degree for all the necessities of life and a decent standard of living.

This will necessitate a double strategy: first to slow down capitalism as will inevitably happen if P-CCs succeed in ignoring the capitalist market in one sphere after another, in one place after another; and second to bring into existence a new mode of production based on the different principles and mentalities. We could call ways of thinking, writing and doing that contribute to these ends 'anarching'. P-CCs would begin in the production of food at the local level. Similar proposals in the past have been dismissed with the charge that it would represent a retreat into the new middle ages or new tribal communities, and so on. My answer to this is simple. The middle ages did not have the digital technology that P-CCs could call on, notably networking, ecologically sensitive and highly efficient food technologies, the possibilities of revolutionizing the production of machinery and tools opened up by alternative technologies, already being put into practice all over the world. The problem of barbarism does seem convincing as we look around the world today, but the creation of new mentalities through more empathetic biological and social parenting would help turn the 'tribes'

from competitive, violent, and untrustworthy others into cooperating, peaceful, and trustworthy neighbours, near and far.

Prospects for change in the long-term

The creation of new mentalities is a project of many generations, a project that begins with damaged parents and communities gradually acquiring the insights and incentives to nurture children through new forms of upbringing and learning. This would include biological and social parenting, learning from existing communities where all adults accept at least some responsibility for all children. New generations will be less damaged. These children in their turn will nurture their own children to be even less damaged. The design of cooperative communities will play an important part in this process. Transformations in housing, transportation, nutrition, and other necessities of a decent life would free up space for everything that the capitalist market squeezes out or whose pleasures it compromises. The culture-ideology of consumerism has socialized populations all over the world to crave all the material rewards that capitalist consumerism flaunts. Better, more love-based parenting could help people to strive for other, less destructive, life goals and social structures to achieve them. Intrinsic to this change in mentalities is that it does not work only at the level of individuals or isolated family groups but at the level of communities and between communities.

Our present reality is capitalist globalization. How, then, could P-CCs be organized to release the emancipatory potential of generic globalization in a non-capitalist world? The simple and encouraging answer is that they would work, in the early stages of transition at least, much as millions of small-scale co-operative groups work at present in enclaves all over the world. The digital commons (e.g. the open source movement) already makes it possible for millions of like-minded people hungry for change to communicate across the globe for the common good. The viability of global networks of P-CCs rests on many untested assumptions. What would people eat? How would they learn? What would they do for healthcare? Who would provide the power to run the computers? How would they be safe? How would they deal with the anthropogenic degradation of all the eco-systems on which the viability of human survival depends? (This is not simply a question of 'climate change', often used as an ideological metonym for the Anthropocene). All this would depend on a multitude of people who now work in the private or public sectors, directly or indirectly, establishing their own self-managed organizations in their local communities producing food, organizing transport, setting up places of learning and transmission of skills, providing healthcare and running energy systems. Eventually, if these organizations proved successful, something like P-CCs would emerge. Some might be very large, capable of securing their own food and energy supplies. Others would be smaller and would need to be networked with others. It would be both futile and undemocratic to suggest that one size fits all.

States, of course, cannot be abolished overnight, though reconstructed political communities could create more genuinely democratizing forms of economic, social, and political organization to encourage and facilitate networks of P-CCs. The transition from the present capitalist-statist hegemony to a new form of society will be lengthy and problematic, but even the flawed forms of democracy that political systems throw up all over the world should provide openings for socialists to win elections and, at the very least, provide conditions that encourage those wishing to escape the capitalist market and the hierarchic state. Many existing progressive social movements at all levels will have an important part to play in the transition, but only if they seriously come to grips with the dead ends of the market and the hierarchic state. Not all, but most, radical social movements lose their

edge the more closely they collaborate with the transnational capitalist class and organs of the hierarchic states, and those that do not usually find themselves isolated and ineffective. The inability of the Left to think through the withering away of the state has had its roots in pointless disputes and antagonisms between Marxists and Anarchists over the last two hundred years. To most people anarchism is a frightening prospect, associated as it usually has been in the public mind with violence and disorder. The irony is that capitalism and the state have been responsible for far more violence and disorder, at home and abroad. Unless these perceptions change, capitalism and the hierarchic state will persist until they collapse under the stress of their own contradictions and threaten the end of human life on our planet.

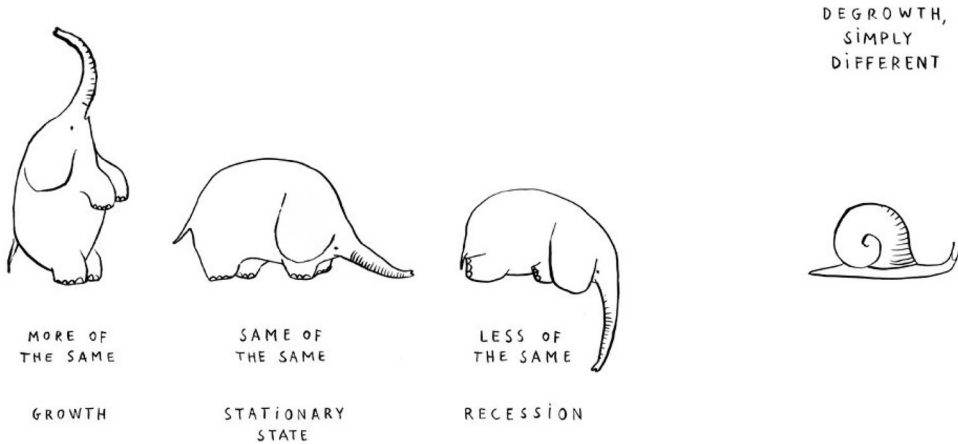
While there is general agreement on the Left that we need to move beyond capitalism, the role of the state has always been contentious. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels declared: 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' The pressing question now is whether the socialist state guarantees the development of all or makes it impossible. My view is that any type of large-scale state makes it impossible because states, by their very nature are hierarchical and repressive to the majority of their populations. Without exception all communist and socialist revolutions either originated or became highly nationalistic in form and content. It is also worth noting that one of the central principles of the Paris Commune was the establishment of a Universal (not a French) Republic, forcing Marx to reconsider his analysis of the state.

People can change. Innovative socio-economic forms outside the capitalist market and the capitalist state are emerging all over the world on a small scale but such initiatives struggle within the present global system. They struggle because the various modes of cooperation, noble as they are, exist within a sea of competitive capitalism and those who lead them are always faced with hard choices that jeopardise their survival in an inhospitable environment. However, there must be a point at which, in any society, the emancipatory potential of an increasing number of small-scale changes tips the balance, and communities organized along producer-consumer cooperative lines look like realistic alternatives to bourgeois society. Neoliberal ideologues argue that there is no alternative to capitalist globalization and, if we mean by this, the accumulation of material possessions for the better-off, they are probably correct. However, if human welfare and happiness are not measured in terms of material possessions, there are clearly better options, particularly if the very survival of human life in the Anthropocene epoch is at risk. If we refuse to believe capitalist (and statist) ideologues and start creating alternative forms of economic, political and cultural organization and these alternatives prove to be successful in their own terms, then the logic of the market and the hierarchic state can be refuted, undermined, or simply ignored. Capitalism and states will eventually wither away.

Growth, and degrowth

There is a large volume of research that is critical of many facets of capitalist society but not much of it seriously calls capitalism itself into question or tries to envision non-capitalist society. The dogma of ever-increasing growth, the mainstay of capitalist globalization, orthodox Marxism-Leninism, social democracy, and the developmental state must be challenged. A relatively new and revolutionary idea that suggests such a critique is convivial degrowth, a theory-driven activist movement³ that aims to decolonize the imaginary of growth (continuous economic growth as the ultimate good) and to establish degrowth (*decroissance* in its original French formulation) as the common-sense

conception of a convivial future. This is expressed graphically as follows:⁴



What would degrowth mean for a socialist P-CC community gradually withdrawing from the hierarchic state. First, the culture-ideology of consumerism would be replaced by a culture-ideology of human rights and responsibilities, prime among which would be a serious commitment to a decent, sustainable standard of living for all. It would certainly mean that the rich would become less wealthy and the poor would become richer in material possessions – and everyone would benefit in non-material riches, eventually. But for this process to start, all the existing critiques of capitalism must abandon the hope that progressive alternatives can thrive by directly challenging the market. For example, in the first instance an emerging P-CC would have the goal of producing its own food with its own resources, providing sustenance to its members free in a non-monetized local economy. This would entail that some members of the community continue to engage in paid employment in the capitalist labour market, supporting the rest in their gradual transition to self-sufficiency in food. It would also entail democratically elected local socialist politicians sympathetic to these goals, making it as easy as possible for them to be achieved, for example by releasing parcels of state-owned land (or legislating for the release of privately-owned unused or under-used land) for the production of food outside the capitalist market.

Revisiting anarchist thinking on the state and hierarchy

In his book on non-violent anarchist thought and practice, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow*, David Goodway quotes Colin Ward:

a society which organizes itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism ... [non-violent anarchism] far from being a speculative vision of a future society ... is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society.

Goodway continues: 'Acceptance of this central insight is not only extraordinarily liberating intellectually but has strictly realistic and practical consequences'. As Ward says: 'anarchism is already partially in existence ... humans are naturally cooperative ... current societies and institutions, however

capitalist and individualist, would completely fall apart without the integrating powers, even if unvalued, of mutual aid and federation'. If we ever got to a stage in which networks of P-CCs started to emerge and began to work outside the capitalist market and the hierarchic national and local state then we can assume they would be peopled by those who already strive to live lives according to the values of socialist communities. Prime amongst these values would be the belief that we must abolish money and all modes of exchange that sanctify what Marx identified as socially necessary labour time (SNLT) – the root of capitalist exploitation. If the goal is to create communities based on the principle 'from each according to capacity, to each according to need', then it follows that there will be no money, no exchange on the basis of equivalences, and no rationing. People will take what they need. They will give what they can. Adults and children will consider this normal; all will participate in the production of food and the other necessities of life. People will work out for themselves what is the best way to live in communities that are respectful of natural limits and the rest of the world.

Notes

1. For an elaboration of how the mass media report the Anthropocene largely in terms of 'reassurance narratives' consistent with the emerging idea of the 'good' Anthropocene, see Sklair (ed) *The Anthropocene in Global Media: Neutralizing the Risk* (Routledge, forthcoming 2020).
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b079njxm>.
3. See <https://www.degrowth.info/en/dim/degrowth-in-movements/>.
4. Image courtesy of Bàrbara Castro Urío, (http://www.labarbara.net/?page_id=1149).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Leslie Sklair is emeritus professor of sociology at the London School of Economics. His work in the last few decades has focused on the transnational capitalist class, capitalist globalization, the culture-ideology of consumerism, architecture and cities and, most recently, how these connect with the Anthropocene. He is co-ordinating an international research project on how the Anthropocene is being reported in mass media in local languages all over the world with a team of 45 volunteer researchers. His edited book on the project (*The Anthropocene in Global Media: Neutralizing the Risk*) will be published by Routledge at the end of 2020.