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A New Vision or a New Reformism?

Workers' democracy from the perspective of
revolutionary eco-anarchism

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jet planes, their servants, their estates, their prestige, their media, their power, and their bought-and-paid-for politicians, not to mention their judges, their colleges, their churches, their prisons, their police, and their military. They will fight tooth and nail, to keep these goodies (which they think of as “civilization”).

Contrary to Gindin and Wright, the fact that today “capitalism is primarily coupled with liberal democracy” (2) means nothing whatever. This was also true when the very democratic Weimar Republic was overthrown by the Nazis. This was true when the democratic Chilean government, under Allende, was overthrown by Pinochet and his army. Nor are fascism and military coups the only methods the capitalists use to stymie elected socialists. We have only to look around the world today, to see what recently happened to the left-wing Syria party in Greece, or is happening to the Workers’ Party of Lula in Brazil, or to the party and government created by the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

The radicals of The Next System Project are doing good work in spreading the ideas—in theory and practice—of workers’ democracy, local self-management, ecological balance locally and internationally, and so on. Gindin is right to urge that these ideas be coupled with socialist consciousness. He is right to say that the state cannot be ignored but must be confronted. But this should mean working for a militant, independent, mass movement or set of movements, prepared to make demands on both big business and on the state. The best way even to win reforms is for a movement to be as radical and militant and threatening as possible, being prepared to occupy factories, workshops, and offices, and ultimately aiming for a total transformation—a revolution. A new reformism is not enough.

References

A new approach has been developing on the U.S. Left. It is neither liberal nor socialist as conventionally understood. It reacts against the failures of capitalism and wants to do away with capitalism as it currently exists. But it is also aware of the terrible failings of state socialism, either of social democratic governments or of the “Communist” totalitarian regimes (which were really state capitalist). Variants of this new approach bear some resemblance to historical anarchism, as well as differences. Conferences have been held, such as a series organized by The Next System Project. (I attended one such conference on March 10–12, 2016, in New York City.) Already counter-responses have been generated, such as by Gindin (2016).

Various approaches support The Next System Project and similar conceptions. It is mostly understood that the drive to accumulate is at the heart of capitalism’s dynamic. This is the cause of inequality, economic crisis, ecological disasters, climate change, wars, and many forms of oppression. Therefore capitalism must be at least drastically modified. Enterprises should be small, democratically managed by their work forces and/or local communities and ecologically balanced. There need to be non-profit enterprises such as consumer cooperatives, credit unions and municipal banks, ownership of industry by towns and cities (municipalization instead of nationalization), and NGOs, along with the many proposed worker-run enterprises (producer cooperatives).

At the same time, most of these approaches do not call for the abolition of the market, accepting competition among enterprises, production for profit rather than use, and the use of money. They project workers’ enterprises competing with each other to sell their goods in the most profitable way. Some propose a workers’ enterprise sector side-by-side with a corporate capitalist sector. Most imagine the continuation of a national state to regulate the overall market. Since the market and the state are accepted, the result must be a reformist, non-revolutionary, program. This is a belief that such an improved society could be reached by using the ex-

isting market (starting up new, worker-managed, industries, etc.) and without challenging the existing state. (For example: Davidson 2011; Schweikart 2002; Speth 2008; Wolff 2012.)

Gindin summarizes: “Partisans of popular control advocate the gradual, direct takeover of workplaces by groups of workers, within capitalism, alongside a similarly immediate expansion of cooperatives (co-ops) and spreading of decentralized participation into every aspect of social life. Over time...capitalism [will give] way to a society based on substantive economic and social democracy.” (Gindin 2016; 2) “The appeal...speaks to a common desire for substantive control over our daily lives....This approach seems to offer an escape from either working within the system and getting co-opted, or waiting for a revolution that never comes...” (3)

(For my overall review of such proposals for worker-managed enterprises, and a revolutionary-anarchist critique, see Price 2014.)

At the NYC Teach-In for The Next System Project

The conference (or “teach-in”) for The Next System Project, began with a plenary panel on Thursday evening. Gar Alperowitz, who was listed as “co-chair” of the Project, began by discussing the need for a program which rejected both capitalism and “state socialism.” When comments from the floor were permitted, I stated that there was a radical tradition which did reject both capitalism and state socialism, namely anarchism. Anarchism had a rich history and body of theory which did not need to be re-invented. Yet there was no mention of anarchism in any of the workshop titles, except one. (That one was initiated by the group I was a member of, System Change Not Climate Change, with a title, “Models for the Next System: Eco-Socialism, Eco-Anarchism, and Beyond.”)

The panel responded to the audience. An African-American woman who was identified as an “activist, Black Lives Matter,”

pled with liberal democracy.” (2) Although focusing on the state, Gindin says he agrees with Wright in rejecting “anarchist-tinged social movements implacably hostile to the state; [instead] he sees the state as an important site of struggle.” (3) “Rather than working within the existing rules of capitalism, [this] requires taking the struggle to the state—not just against the state, but inside the state and with the goal of transforming the state.” (11)

In other words, the state is central to maintaining capitalism, in all areas. Building up alternate economic institutions, however democratic, will not challenge the power of the state to back up what Bernie Sanders calls “the billionaire class.” So it is necessary to confront the state. But it would be wrong, apparently, to be too “implacably hostile to the state”—like those deplorable anarchists. The one thing the anarchists agreed on with Lenin, incidentally, was the need to overthrow, smash, dismantle, and destroy the existing—capitalist—state, and replace it with other institutions. (He wanted a “workers’ state” while revolutionary anarchists propose a federation of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and democratic militia units.) Note that “an insurrectionary solution” does not necessarily mean violence—that depends on circumstances, such as the amount of unity of the working class and its support among the ranks of the military.

Instead, Gindin believes that it will be possible to struggle inside the “site” of the state, to take over the state, and to transform the state into a “different kind of state.” (12)

Do We Need a Revolution?

The problem is that any form of socialism, including all the visions and projects raised at The Next System Project and by similar visionaries, threatens capitalism. No matter how democratic, ecological, or wise the proposals are, the capitalists will not accept losing their wealth, their factories, their offices, their mansions, their

This is the key point—with which I completely agree. The state is dominated by big business. It is an agency of the capitalist class, serving to coordinate its policies, at home and internationally. It is the place for the factions of the ruling class to clarify their differences and agreements and to fight out their differing views. The democratic-capitalist state serves to fool the people into thinking that they really run society. When severe crises hit the system, as in 2008, it is where the agents of the capitalists decide whether to stimulate the economy or to cut back (“austerity”), whether to bail out the biggest firms or to let them go down, etc.

In relation to this discussion, the state can permit democratic co-ops at the margins of the system. They do this around the world, and did it even in Argentina. Marginal co-ops do not threaten the system. Mondragon was permitted by the fascist government of Franco. I live in a housing co-op, which works out well, but is no danger to the capitalist housing market.

It would be quite another matter if producer and consumer cooperatives, and other alternate institutions, began to spread and threaten to take-over the economy and replace the state (I call this the “kudzu strategy”). Suppose cooperatives threatened to replace General Motors or U.S. Steel or Chase Bank? (Just to think about it shows how unlikely such a development would be.) The capitalist class dominates the market (obviously) as well as the state. These are THEIR institutions. They would not permit them to be taken from them. Period. Is it necessary to spell out the economic and political (and police and military) methods which they would call on?

Ginden is entirely correct in criticizing any approach which does not understand that “the state stands at the center of property relations and capitalist power.” (3) He rejects any approach which tries to ignore the state or to work around the state. But, alas, he too is a reformist—with regard to the state. He praises Erik Olin Wright, “a Marxist sociologist,” because “he sensibly views an insurrectionary solution as outmoded in an era when capitalism is primarily cou-

did remark on my comments. (I am not giving her name because I am quoting completely from my memory, which may be unreliable.) She said, “Black Lives Matter does not have official leaders. Our local groups are entirely self-managing. They are tied together horizontally, not vertically. We engage in direct action, not lobbying or running in elections. We ARE anarchists!” She followed these comments by saying that they did not see a need to make a big point about it. She cited a story about an older Black woman who was taking advantage of the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast Program, for her family. Asked what she thought about the Panthers’ radical politics, the old lady said that she did not care, so long as they were helping her family.

The first half of her statement was quite right. The way Black Lives Matter is organized is mostly consistent with anarchism. However, it has been used as a springboard for running in elections. Without a clear theory and program (an “ideology”), any movement will have difficulty resisting the enormous pressure to get involved with the Democratic Party, the lobbying process, and the NGOs. But I would not advocate that Black Lives Matter add a Black-and-red flag to its banners and put a circle A on its posters. Nor should they make it a condition of joining! (“Only anarchists welcome!”) I do think that conscious Black anarchists should organize themselves (democratically and federally) within Black Lives Matter and other parts of the new liberation movement. They should seek to educate themselves, to develop their own ideas further, and to oppose both liberal and Stalinist trends in the movement. They should, I believe, ally themselves with anarchists of other races, nationalities, and ethnic groups, to advance the overall struggle.

As for the old woman, it is likely that she did have a pretty good idea what the Panthers believed. That’s why the Panthers sold a newspaper after all and had political classes—to spread their ideas. She knew that they were revolutionaries, nationalists, and socialists—just about everyone did. But she did not necessarily

agree or care about that. She respected the good work they did and was willing to work with them. (A small number of Panthers—and Black Liberation Army soldiers—became anarchists while in prison. They developed an anarchist critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the Panthers and BLA.)

The workshops and panels at the conference were varied. Many were consistent with an anarchist or semi-anarchist approach, advocating local organizing, democratic workplaces, worker centers, local financing, local ecological perspectives (such as “permaculture”) and so on. But despite the call for bold new visions, the predominant perspective was about ways of gradually working these liberatory practices into the existing society, without upheavals. That is, the overall perspective was reformist.

Sam Gindin’s Critique of these New Projects

Gindin examines the views of Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, of Richard Wolff, Gar Alperovitz, and Erick Olin Wright. It is unclear why he raises Albert and Hahnel. Their theory of “Parecon” (“participatory democracy”) is for workers’ and community democracy but rejects worker ownership of individual factories and workplaces, in favor of society-wide ownership. It rejects both central planning and the market and proposes an alternate system of bottom-up democratic coordination (Albert 2003). I do not advocate Parecon as such. That is really another discussion. Another visionary who propose a non-market/non-state program is Fotopoulos (1997). Such programs are distinct from both Wolff and Alperovitz, who accept continuing use of the market with self-governing enterprises. So do others, such as Gus Speth, Carl Davidson, David Schweikart, or Naomi Klein. (Alperowitz, Schweikart, and Speth are leaders of The Next System Project.) Anarchists are enemies of the state and of capitalism (and all other oppressions), and rarely endorse any use of the market.

Gindin points to the limitations of worker-owned enterprises, competing in the capitalist market, which are owned by the workers (producer cooperatives). He examines the events in Argentina after the 2001 economic and political crisis. Workers took over a many shuttered capitalist firms. They demonstrated their ability to manage factories at least as well as the former bosses. However, “they started with facilities capitalists had left undercapitalized and uncompetitive; ...they had to put their own savings into the facilities or accept lower wages to address the issues of debt and new investment. The case of Argentina casts doubt on the notion that having more worker-controlled workplaces or co-ops readily translates into an increasingly egalitarian social order...Competitive markets...transform differences in assets, skills, locational advantages, and product valuation into stark inequalities between workers and communities.” (4)

He finds that similar problems developed in the relatively self-managed enterprises under Tito’s Yugoslavia with its “market socialism”. There also were problems with unemployment, an inevitable product of the market. He also examines developments in Quebec, the Swedish Meidner Plan, and the large Mondragon co-op in the Basque region of Spain. Undoubtedly, Mondragon has demonstrated some of the possibilities of a democratic workers-owned set of enterprises, but it still has limits.(Also see Davidson 2011.) For example, like every other business it had to retract during the economic downturn and layoff some workers.

He concludes, “My point is not to dismiss the importance of strategies designed to increase worker control and ownership. In general, factory takeovers and co-ops should be enthusiastically supported.” (9) But he challenges the “apolitical strategies” of “the movement for worker control within capitalism.” (9) His criticism is not so much the attempt to use the market, but the ignoring of the government, “... sidestepping the messy complexities involved with confronting the state—even though the state stands at the center of property relations and capitalist power.” (3)