

Pollard: Power and How to Topple It

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Another excellent essay by David Pollard on a strategy for defeating the present corporatist system.

The third way to bring about major global change is incapacitation — rendering the old order unable to function by sapping what it needs to survive. This is the method that disease uses to prey on fragile and vulnerable organs, that parasites and venomous creatures use to weaken and sometimes kill their (much larger) hosts, that terrorists use to paralyze their enemies, and that innovative businesses use to undermine, render obsolete and supplant bigger, less flexible businesses. For those of us with neither the patience or religious fanaticism to wait for a global natural catastrophe, nor the naivety to believe in a successful ‘popular’ revolution, this third way is the only way to change, and save, our beleaguered planet.

...Actions that are aimed to incapacitate are called guerrilla (meaning ‘little war’) actions. Since the Vietnam war debacle in the 1960s the very term has struck fear in the hearts of the power elite, because they know that, in today’s heavily concentrated, centralized, interconnected, ‘grid-locked’ society, this is where they are most vulnerable, most powerless to defend themselves.

This is a time-honored strategy in many different left-decentralist traditions, and passes under a variety of names. Perhaps the most well-known is the Wobbly slogan “building the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.” Proudhon expressed something like it in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, as the mutualist economy growing within the statist one until the former eclipsed the latter. The political would eventually be absorbed in the economic and social, and the distinction between public and private would wither away. Paul Goodman described the process this way:

A free society cannot be the substitution of a ‘new order’ for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life.

This statement by Gustav Landauer is also a good one:

The State is a condition, a certain relationship among human beings, a mode of behavior, we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another...

The process of incapacitation, as Pollard describes it, has four components:

1. Identify the vulnerabilities: Fragility, overconcentration, ignorance, arrogance, lack of diversity, centralization, lack of redundancy, popular disgust, anxiety, dissatisfaction or apprehension, ill-preparedness, lack of agility, overcomplexity (left hand doesn't know what the right is doing), lack of imagination and creativity, etc.
2. Acquire resources stealthily: Put together what you need without letting your target know you're doing so, or even what you are capable of doing with them.
3. Develop solutions that exploit the vulnerabilities.
4. Rigorously assess the likelihood of those solutions working effectively (incapacitating the incumbent power), and deploy only the high-probability solutions, quickly, before the incumbents have time to react and defend themselves.

In Part Two, Pollard describes in detail some non-violent ways of fighting this guerrilla war.

The focus will be on new technology, new infrastructure, new models and new processes that replace the vulnerable ones that are the causes of so many of today's global problems — and ensuring that these replacements are Open Source, and stay in the hands of all the world's people.

As a paradigm for the successor society, Pollard cites the “village society” advocated by Freeman Dyson in his mind-blowing *Wired* interview. The villages, based on decentralized energy and information technology, and open-source innovation (including biotech, which I find problematic), will be able to sustain themselves and network with each other independently, for the most part, of the existing corporate economy.

Pollard insists, perversely, on referring to the process of incapacitation and replacement as “the collapse of the market economy.” But in my view, the successor society he envisions has a much stronger and more legitimate claim to the “market” label than does the present corporate society he aims to replace. For example, consider this passage:

The first part of this guerrilla undermining of the corporatist-controlled ‘market’ economy — the ‘making free’ of information — is already underway. The war for free information between corporatists and people is occurring on multiple fronts: The attempt by large corporations to patent everything so it cannot be used by the people without paying an exorbitant and prohibitive fee; the attempt by large corporations to ban file-sharing without first paying extortion to the intellectual property ‘owner’ (little of which actually goes to the artist); the attempt to make more of the information on the Internet ‘pay for itself’. But the people are winning this guerrilla war.

Although Pollard conflates “corporate-controlled” with “market,” in any war “between corporatists and people” the latter have by far the better claim to genuine free market credentials. In most of the cases he lists in the passage above—patents on technology, file-sharing—it’s clearly the corporations who are at war with the “market economy,” and the people who are defending it.

I do have some doubts concerning the presumed illegitimacy of making the Internet “pay for itself”; the “cost principle,” that the consumers of goods and services should pay the cost of providing them, has a venerable individualist anarchist pedigree. But I strenuously oppose attempts at a corporate “enclosure” of the Internet by the information equivalent of absentee landlords; far better to treat it as a social commons. Nevertheless, to the extent that services cost something to provide, somebody has to pay for them—and that somebody should be the beneficiary.

Apparently, Pollard makes the common mistake of confusing the market with the cash nexus. Writing almost 36 years ago, Karl Hess proclaimed in *The Libertarian Forum*:

Libertarianism is a people’s movement and a liberation movement. It seeks the sort of open, non-coercive society in which the people, the living, free, distinct people, may voluntarily associate, dis-associate, and, as they see fit, participate in the decisions affecting their lives. This means a truly free market in everything from ideas to idiosyncracies. It means people free collectively to organize the resources of their immediate community or individualistically to organize them; it means the freedom to have a community-based and supported judiciary where wanted, none where not, or private arbitration services where that is seen as most desirable. The same with police. The same with schools, hospitals, factories, farms, laboratories, parks, and pensions. Liberty means the right to shape your own institutions. It opposes the right of those institutions to shape you simply because of accreted power or gerontological status.

Or as Jesse Walker put it once on the LeftLibertarian discussion list:

I have a fondness for libertarian socialists of the Paul Goodman/Colin Ward type — the kind who see market exchanges and non-market forms of voluntary cooperation as interpenetrating each other, rather than regarding the cash nexus as overwhelming everything it touches.

Of course, I prefer to use the term “market” to encompass all forms of voluntary interactions, whether monetized or not. But the point is that a society based on market interaction might well look more like something designed by Ivan Illich than by Milton Friedman; a little more like The Farm than Galt’s Gulch; a little more... well, you get the idea.

Pollard’s post contains an oddly disturbing anecdote. At a public informational event on wind power, presented by the Canadian government, Pollard describes the bizarrely negative reactions of one (to say the least) rather exercised fellow:

One extremely agitated gentleman kept trying to sabotage the day’s events. Having all these local, piecemeal energy producers was ‘grossly inefficient’, he said, and for that reason (and because they are ‘eyesores’) they should be banned, in favour of large mega-farms of energy owned by private industry. Private industry would pick

more 'efficient' sites, get economies of scale, and they 'knew the business' and would be motivated by profits to run these farms in a more businesslike way.

Again, the alternative energy advocates (aside—a *big* aside—from their government funding) were far more on the side of free markets than was that scary specimen.

Besides being so far off the high end of Adorno's F-scale as to be positively radioactive (is there such a thing as a Type-AAA personality?), that poor guy is utterly wrong. The distribution of energy through centralized networks is extremely costly and inefficient. With decentralized production of energy at the point of consumption, on the other hand, almost nothing is lost in transmission. If decentralized energy production were as "grossly inefficient" as he makes out, it wouldn't have to be banned; it would lose out to more efficient competition from the utility dinosaurs. On the other hand, if centralized energy production for the grid is so "efficient," why is it one of the most subsidized industries in existence? And while we're at it, private citizens voluntarily cooperating to produce their own energy *is* "private industry." It's a hell of a lot more "private" than corporations that can't survive without suckling at the government teat. They "know the business" all right: like a rich courtier of Louis XIV, they know how "profitable" it is to have the king's ear.

Pollard continues:

This guy was utterly outnumbered on Saturday, but watch out — as word gets out that we can all be energy self-sufficient, and own our own 'utility', getting energy at cost (which is plummeting), the energy companies will join the war on the other side. They have billions to lose, and will not stand idly by as the peasants take back the means of their own production.

Ain't that the truth! As the public utilities start to lose ground to people producing their own energy for themselves, we can expect them to discover all sorts of ways that this threatens the "public safety" and "general welfare." It will likely follow a pattern similar to that of imported prescription drugs, which bogus "free market" advocates want to prohibit on grounds of "safety." Even at present, many localities have "safety codes" requiring houses to be hooked up to the grid. Ernest Callenbach, in the fictional setting of *Ecotopia Rising*, described a further escalation of the same phenomenon, as an increasingly desperate corporate system lashed out against the human-scale society replacing it.

"Public safety" and "general welfare" are the last refuge of scoundrels.

NOTE—Dave Pollard, in response to my criticisms of his use of the term "market," pointed out: "I try to always use 'market' in quotes to indicate its (mis-)use as a euphemism for unregulated oligopoly. I love the idea of a free market for regulating prices."

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