

We Are More Than We Eat

Anarchist-Communism vs. Participatory Economics

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In my critique of parecon, *The Sad Conceit of Participatory Economics* (NEA #8), I posed four questions for parecon. Tom Wetzel in his reply, *Debating Economic Vision for a Society without Classes* (NEA #9), has managed to answer none of them satisfactorily while taking a fairly ham-fisted swipe at anarcho-communist economics in return. So what are these questions?

1. Could a system of exchange relations like parecon ever prevent the re-emergence of capitalist social relations?

I argued that the parecon system could not prevent people working harder or longer, earning more consumption shares, delaying consumption in order to build up “capital” and then using this capital to subvert the parecon system in their own interests. All the texts on parecon suggest that there would be laws and regulations to prevent it, that the “system” would simply not provide inputs (money, machinery and supplies) to proto-capitalists. But isn’t this a centrally-planned and controlled economy?

Compare this with anarchist-communism. Tom asked, “If someone wants to employ wage slaves, can they do so?” Within anarchist-communism there is no money and no private property. You could “commandeer” an abandoned factory, persuade producer federations to supply you machinery and materials and advertise for people to work in the factory. But they do so only because they want to and see value in “your” project not because you have money to persuade them to do it: because there is no money. Things might be produced but who would you sell them to? There is no money. And what is to stop people simply turning up at your factory and taking what they want: there is no property. And if the workers decide to “collectivize” the factory and get rid of the boss (you), you couldn’t stop them, either by moral or physical force. You focus on the economics of it all; we focus on power and its abolition as the basis of relationships between human beings.

We will have to change the economic basis of the revolutionary society, Tom and I agree on that. But the idea of exchanging one set of masters (the bosses) for another (the IFBs parecon proposes) while risking the re-emergence of a new capitalist class is simply grotesque. Some libertarian socialists have advocated central planning, as Tom says, but not anarchist-communists and not the Anarchist Federation. We’re beyond trying to control an essentially market-based, capitalist economy with sticking plaster solutions as parecon does, or as worker’s democracy promises to do.

2. Could parecon operate without controlling institutions and/or governments?

Tom answered this question for me when he said society must “have a means of setting basic rules and of enforcing those rules.” Parecon society is, therefore, an artificial construct containing and constraining people rather than voluntary and organic relationships between human beings.

When asked about government, pareconomists get a bit shifty and vague. Their basic line is that governments primarily exist to correct the deficiencies of the market system and since parecon is perfect what need for a state? They also say that political decisions would be decided on a participatory basis. But how? Essentially pareconomists mean that a democratic majority

would have the right to dictate to a minority and will have the means to enforce their decisions through the operation of controlling economic and social institutions.

For instance, in dealing with the question of black markets and re-emerging capitalist economies, pareconomists say: "...society might make non-planning transfers illegal..." Who is passing these laws except governments, bureaucracies or democratic majorities? Pareconomists also accept that parecon society will have the right to prosecute people breaking its economic [iron] laws; how, except with police, lawyers, fines, courts, judges and prisons? They also say "...the economy will not allot resources to a [capitalist] production unit..." How, unless the producer federations and IFBs close ranks against upstart [dissident?] entrepreneurs. And isn't this a power relationship?

3. Would we be compelled to work?

The problem with parecon is that it requires people to work. If you don't want to work or want to work in ways society finds "unproductive" or assigns a low value to, you will be poor all your life or starve. Tom's use of the example of a poet on a desert island was very revealing. Parecon rewards people partly for "effort": but who decides its value? Might parecon decide that one hour of easy art might need to be "balanced" by two hours of hard ditch-digging? And who do I appeal to if I disagree? Someone, somewhere is going to decide the "value" of your effort and a global parecon society will have no space for people who take a different view. There's another side to this. Tom says that businesses cut costs to stay competitive (he's right) but misses the point that people have their own interests as well. Suppose a group of workers in a self-managing factory were to reorganize how they work on a more efficient basis, reducing input shares and tightening their workload? Since parecon rewards us for our effort, the instant response of the IFBs would be to cut our wages or demand that we balance our jobs by taking some other, shittier work as well.

Tom believes that we should think about (and base our society) on what is "the best use of our time for satisfying the needs and desires of people." Work must be personally fulfilling but its primary value is not to satisfy the needs and desires of [other] people. Society should exist to satisfy our needs and desires, not the other way around. Because human beings are both individual and social, we will decide to be "useful" because it fulfills our needs (to cooperate, to socialize or have solidarity with, to interact with other human beings in positive ways).

Suppose instead of trying to create equal jobs and start from the assumption that people are (socially) equal. And suppose work was voluntary so that no one could be "confined to sweeping the floors" as Tom fears (and we agree). A society based on the principles of equality and voluntary association would be far saner, spiritually harmonious, fairer and fundamentally efficient than one endlessly inventing new ways to control or channel artificially-induced instincts like the will to power or self-seeking.

Parecon is not a revolutionary proposal, nor even one of the (economic) building blocks of a revolutionary movement. It is reformist. It accepts certain things as given and certain solutions as necessary. If humans need to have rules imposed upon them, to be governed, then so be it says parecon. Parecon is about human beings as they are and trying to control and regulate their behavior. Anarchist-communism is about humanity as it is becoming, who will agree to the terms upon which we live together as free and equal individuals.

4. How would parecon prevent the emergence of groups and classes with divergent economic and social agendas?

Interestingly, Tom alluded to this in his reply when he said “The liberation of the working class requires not only a new economic order [parecon] but also a new political order through which we are empowered to defend our social order.” Defend against who? Contending social classes or organizations? And how? Through adversarial political parties?

Tom uses the example of the Spanish Civil War to try to discredit anarchist- communist ideas about “politics.” But he draws quite the wrong conclusions. The Spanish Revolution failed because the CNT and its allies couldn’t dismantle the economic means by which the working class are politically controlled and exploited: not just the government but also the banks and lending houses, the wages and contracts system, taxation, property laws and so on. They failed because while anarchists had a very profound understanding of politics and power, they did not have the opportunity or will to extend anarchist-communist economics and social realities throughout Spain.

Tom’s reply does not touch on the question of re-emergent trade unions and political parties, mutual and self-interested associations demanding more for their members. Yet even in his own formulations he accepts that people could give part of their consumption shares to the party of their choice or sell subversive literature to those who want to buy it. Parecon imagines a utopia where everyone has so much they will remain forever immune from the siren song of wanting more or clarion calls against injustice.

Parecon imagines a “society” of billions of individualistic worker-consumers who won’t care about inequities or issues so long as they are getting their fare share. Because our share of overall consumption rises and falls through the job-balancing process according to circumstances we largely have no control over, there are bound to be occasions when people will feel under-rewarded or over-exploited. Over us all stand the IFBs. The “coordinating” function is actually a control function. The IFBs must extract surplus value from work [taxation] in order to fund non-productive, public activities (firefighters, ambulance drivers, etc.). Suppose one group of workers thought the IFBs had become bloated, cost too much to operate? Their worker and consumer councils might pass resolutions demanding more pay or less taxation but either the IFBs would need to refuse their demands or accede, requiring other workers and communities to earn a little less or pay a little more.

Economics of a Free Society

So how would society and its economy be organized on the basis of anarchist communism? What are the main issues affecting it? Assuming the abolition of money, wages, wage slavery, jobs, banks, lending houses, taxation and the like, the chief issues are: (a) organizing work, particularly equitably, (b) efficient planning and coordination, (c) equitable sharing of goods produced, (d) avoiding waste and disutility.

Equitable Work: Firstly, the definition of “work” will fundamentally change. The difference between what we call work, jobs, toil, chores, play, hobbies, and the like — the full range of human activity — will dissolve. What remains will be things we choose to do. Now some of those things will be “necessary,” “socially useful,” “productive” in social terms but primarily important

because we choose to do them. Other things are what people like Tom regard as shirking (poetry, for instance) or things we can't have until we've earned them (leisure). But poetry and play and leisure and art and hobbies are as socially useful as anything else. How many of us feel good about our life and our work after a weekend of hiking in the mountains, watching the game or fixing up an old Chevy? And by decentralizing activity and production to the local level, there will be facilities for us to be productive in our leisure time, making jewelry, teaching poetry, painting urban murals, digging the communal gardens or whatever.

Of course Tom's fear is the socially corrosive effect of shirking, the "free riders" who contribute nothing to society. If you accept that work must always be involuntary, boring or unfulfilling then you are right to fear that many millions of people will avoid it like the plague. But most work is cooperative and social. If we democratize work as well as society, and if we choose the work we do and when we do it, if we chose only to do fulfilling or interesting work (fulfilling and interesting to us, not everyone is the same), then how many "shirkers" would there be?

Tom's example of a poet amongst shipwrecked sailors presupposes a society that is unstable, facing crisis everyday, without reserves or margins to sustain it. But what about a stable, self-sustaining society of abundance (or at least post-scarcity), where we have used knowledge wisely, applied technology sensibly, created millions of largely self-sufficient diverse communities, where everyone has enough? What then?

The revolution will be a moral revolution, a fundamental evolution within humanity towards ethical living. Members of the free society will be both individual and communal, who do things that are both personal and social, who please themselves and co-operate because it is these billions of actions in sum and entirely voluntary that make up everything society is. People look hard for anarchist-communism's "economic system" and fail to find it because they are looking in the wrong place. The mistake they make is to assume that because they can't see it (it's inside all of us) it doesn't exist and therefore something (in this case parecon) must be invented and imposed upon us.

Planning and Coordination: One of the biggest things the free society will produce and one of the biggest "loads" on the system would be information. Information in the mass would flow to those places where people are making decisions (personal and social) about work, supply, demand, distribution and so on. All tasks that needed doing or were being proposed would be advertised in some way: on noticeboards, newspapers, and the internet, by posters saying "help wanted" or at our local "labor exchange." We would apply for the job in the same way, meeting the workers doing it already and talking about the skills required, hours to be worked and so on. If we got the job, then some local and central information bank is told that and the "adverts" are cancelled. The same applies to goods. Now this will be a process of coordination, distribution, allocation and so on that is organized entirely horizontally, through rational processes and decisions. It will be a cybernetic system of "interrogative" ("does anyone want to work here?") and "response" ("we have surplus wheat") with a lot of coordination being done bilaterally but with information about decisions and allocations passed on to the places recording and processing information and people managing this information.

At this point opponents say "Aha! Here is the making of a privileged and powerful bureaucracy. These places where information is processed are places of power and control." But as I have said, most decisions are taken locally and bilaterally, without anyone having the power to say yes or no to them. Most decisions about production and distribution in even our world get taken like this: It's just that government demands the right to vote, legalize and control those decisions. But we

would also suggest that the problem could be overcome by us all agreeing that no one could work in this area for more than three years, one year as a candidate, one year as a coordinator, a final year as a mentor to new workers then out, permanently. And the cooperatives and syndicates managing coordination would be open to anyone to attend and that they have lay members chosen by lot from people volunteering and that all their decisions are publicly available for anyone to see or challenge. What then?

The Problem of Allocation: The main problems are inequitable allocation (of work and goods) and the dangers of bureaucracies misusing their power to allocate to control people. But as I said above, in a decentralized society of largely self-sufficient communities the amount of “allocation” as opposed to self-managed sharing and distribution would be small and the danger slight. We would manage allocation, making ethical decisions about who gets what. If our wheat growing community receives two requests for grain, one from a community facing famine and the other from a community that needs fine flour to make cakes for its annual festival, what do we do? As long as we act ethically, (and without fear of social stigma or the incentive of money, what else is there?), who would challenge us? But if we chose to send it to the festival and the local distribution federation diverted our grain to the famine-threatened region, we would have no recourse against them. The grain is not ours and we cannot impose our decisions on others; they are ethical beings too.

The difference between parecon and anarchist-communism is that our relations are not mediated by bureaucratic institutions (the IFBs), they are personal, immediate, and direct – with each other. That is how things will be allocated, by millions of ethical decisions made everyday by billions of people. The health of society would be measured by the extent that all of these ethical, self-managed and voluntary acts balance themselves and help meet the needs (spiritual and material) of humanity year in and year out without decree, regulation or iteration. Anarchist-communism is a social revolution in which the true nature of humanity is re-discovered and expresses itself through individual and collective action. Anarchist-communism is not a system but the sum total of billions of individual acts occurring every day, acts stemming from the social-organic conscience of the billions of people who do them. It exists nowhere but in the minds of people and the cooperation between them.

Waste and Disutility: One of the most highly “engineered” parts of society will be the flow and control of information, precisely to avoid problems from over- and under-allocation, waste, shortages and so on. In our society business builds waste and mismanagement into its cost structures and passes it on. This will not be true of the free society of tomorrow. Decentralized, self-sufficient communities will simply not tolerate waste. And intelligent information, intelligently used will control disutility.

But this notion of waste and disutility also needs to be challenged. I’m sure that when Tom talks of waste he is thinking of food rotting in warehouses because trains haven’t been sent to pick it up. And when he speaks of disutility he is speaking both of factories only producing left shoes or too many poets and not enough coal-mining. And yes, this could happen. We think that in an ethical society built around notions of self-sufficiency, cooperation and equity such events would be occasional and manageable. In our society of profits and costs, food rots because it is cheaper to let it rot than to hire extra trains to transport it, pay overtime to people to load it or have unused barges in nearby harbors to carry it. But in the free society, people might stop doing some things in order to help with the loading, divert trains or recommission them for service, have planned for emergencies and have spare barges nearby. If society anticipates these

problems, is responsive to need, is flexible, has spare capacity to meet the need and learns from the crisis so it doesn't happen next time, then it is a healthy, self-sustaining and stable society that will survive and grow.

Parecon does provide an alternative to hierarchical and exploitative relations within a capitalist society but it does not provide either the means to overthrow that society or the basis of universal freedom in the future. It is, sadly, like all the other reformist proposals of well-meaning thinkers of the last century. The only thing that has been added is that parecon is designed to manage the urge for instant gratification that capitalism has planted deep within all of us. Anarchist communism rejects this notion utterly. We do need forms of self-management and organization that challenge capitalism and the state, directly and indirectly. But if the parecon revolution did occur, we would quickly find ourselves back in the coils of capitalism through the means of money, property and law, which parecon does not propose to abolish.

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