

Parecon vs. Revolutionary Class-Struggle Anarchism

Responding to Albert

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Where We Agree and Where We Disagree

On what do our two tendencies agree? Quite a lot. While supporting struggles for reforms, we agree that our goal should be a revolution which gets rid of capitalism and all forms of oppression (gender, national, race, sexual orientation, etc.) as well as the state. This should be done by a movement of all the oppressed, including, but not limited to, the working class. In place of both the state and the capitalist economy should be a federation, rooted in directly-democratic councils of communities and workplaces. Organized neither by the market nor by centralized planning, the economy should be democratically planned-from-the-bottom-up by these councils. A stateless, self-managed, polity should consist of federated councils. Under corporate capitalism, there has been a huge expansion of “middle class” layers, which are capable, under certain circumstances, of replacing the bourgeoisie as a new, collectivist, ruling class. For this and other reasons, a free society should seek to reorganize work so that jobs include both creative, mental, aspects, as well as less interesting, laborious, aspects. Also, for this and other reasons, we should work to make present-day organizations of opposition as radically democratic as possible.

Obviously we have a great deal of agreement. Where do we disagree? Let me give two examples of where revolutionary anarchists disagree with the Parecon model.

Virtually all varieties of anarchism are decentralist, even though we also believe in national and international federations. We want small regions which rely mostly on local resources and which integrate self-managed industries with sustainable organic agriculture, creating democratic communities and workplaces. While Parecon advocates local councils, its primary economic units are whole nations, such as the U.S. (an arbitrary entity). Planning primarily for a unit which covers most of a continent is inefficient in both production and distribution, leads to ecological disaster, and makes it difficult to have truly democratic economic planning or politics.

The historic mainstream of anarchism has advocated libertarian communism, whereby people work for social reasons and share in the social wealth according to their needs. Parecon instead advocates paying able-bodied workers differently according to the amount and intensity of their labor. Since people’s abilities and needs are unequal, this is still a form of inequality, a remnant of capitalism. It will be inconsistent with the full potential productivity of modern technology, which could eventually reduce required labor to almost nothing. I would not object to this aspect of Parecon, if it were proposed as transitional to full communism, to be phased in with improved productivity and moral consciousness. But that is not the Parecon program.

The Parecon Method

I could expand on these and other points about the Parecon image of post-capitalist society. Instead I will comment on the method of Parecon’s model-building. Apparently this is based on a set of moral criteria, which were chosen by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. Then a model was constructed of an economy which could fulfill these criteria. This presents a moral vision which is counterposed to the evils of capitalism.

I agree with the need for a utopian vision. And I see the usefulness of developing a detailed model of how such a society might actually (possibly) work. This is counterposed to the scientific method of Marxism, which refuses to present a moral vision, because socialism will supposedly develop (automatically and inevitably) out of the dynamics of capitalism.

However, Parecon goes too far in one direction. Its model is almost completely divorced from an analysis of capitalism and its dynamics and from a program to abolish capitalism (which is presented only in the broadest of strokes, as opposed to the details of the Parecon model). There is no discussion of how a post-capitalist society might arise out of a revolutionary upheaval. Yet the basic ideas of a councilist economy are based not on abstract models but on the real experiences of past revolutions, in which councils were created by working people without the benefit of theorists!

Perhaps, after a revolution, a free society will immediately implement the Parecon program. Perhaps not. Or perhaps some regions will attempt it and others will experiment with other variations of a councilist economy and polity. We are too far from a revolution to know. I am not against attempts to work out possible models to aid future generations (Parecon being only one such model), but I reject any insistence on making one model the official program.

Michael's goal seems to be for Parecon to become the "widely shared vision" held by a large part of the left. This vision is not to be a general commitment to a councilist, anti-authoritarian, socialist view—such as the paragraph of things anarchists and Pareconists agree on which I presented earlier. No, it has to be the specific Parecon model. This goes along with his rejection of the label of "socialism" (and, no doubt, of "communism") as meaning the same as state socialism—although, inconsistently, he does not reject the label "left," even though the mainstream left is just as historically identified with statism as is mainstream socialism. Similarly he makes no mention of "anarchism." (I get the impression from other writings that he is ambivalent about anarchism; however, Robin Hahnel regards Parecon as a version of "libertarian socialism.")

To try to make the left committed specifically to Parecon instead of, in general, libertarian socialism (socialist anarchism and anti-statist Marxism) is inflexible, unexperimental, and, frankly, sectarian.

Sectarian? Opportunist? Or Revolutionary?

But Michael says he rejects sectarianism. "There is not only one right way forward and most strategic commitments need to be flexible, and certainly not dismissive much less sectarian." Who could disagree (at this level of generalization)? Flexibility, humility, and respect for others, even when disagreeing, are important.

Yet there are two things wrong with Michael's statement. First is that, while Michael condemns ultra-left sectarianism (with good reason), he unfortunately does not warn about the reciprocal danger of opportunism. By this I do not mean personal corruption but a political capitulation to capitalism. Does Michael agree that there is a right danger of opportunism? I do not know. Second, surely every "strategic commitment" cannot be equally correct. Some may be wrong. It is not sectarian to say this and to have a respectful and open discussion of political differences.

For example, we are at the climax of a national election and radicals have differing views ("strategic commitments" or "agendas") on what to do and say — although radicals all are pretty marginal right now and these views are mostly propaganda for the future. The Democratic Socialists of America and the Communist Party are for working in the Democratic Party. The International Socialist Organization and most other Trotskyists are for rejecting the Democrats and building (what amounts to) new, middle class, pro-capitalist parties (Greens, the Nader campaign, New Party, Labor Party, etc.). Michael himself does not make a big deal out of electoralism, but

has written that if he were in a swing state, he would vote for Obama. Instead, revolutionary class struggle anarchists advocate that labor and oppressed communities break with the Democrats and all electoralism, in favor of non-electoral mass action, particularly the general strike.

These views cannot all be right. Some have to be wrong. It is obvious what I support—without my condemning the motives of those who I think are wrong. Just recently I listened to the “debate” between the presidential candidates. McCain sounded like a crazed war-monger (sounded to me, not necessarily to the average voter). Obama said he would expand the war in Afghanistan, remain in Iraq until he could “responsibly” withdraw, unilaterally attack Pakistan, threaten Iran and possibly attack it, and bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, which means that if Russia attacks either, the U.S. would be at war with Russia. In brief, Obama will be an imperialist aggressor, mass murderer, and war criminal. And he has the support of the liberals and most of the left! Forgive me for saying that this view is wrong, politically and morally, for those who regard themselves as socialists, anarchists, or revolutionaries. It is political opportunism.

In summary, Michael’s Parecon and revolutionary class struggle anarchism have a great deal in common; they are, in my opinion (and that of Robin Hahnel), both varieties of libertarian socialism. Anarchists have some criticisms of the Parecon model of a post-capitalist society, of which I refer to two. More significantly perhaps, I have criticisms of the method of Parecon model-making, which I feel is too much divorced from an analysis of how capitalism functions and how a movement will be built. Finally, I believe that it is not only important to be against ultra-left sectarianism, but also against the right danger of opportunism, such as support for the imperialist Democratic Party and its candidates or for any form of electoralism.

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