

What Is To Be Done?

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August 20, 2020

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“Throughout the world the vast majority of people have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives. They sell their labour power while others who own or control the means of production accumulate wealth, make the laws and use the whole machinery of the State to perpetuate and reinforce their privileged positions.”

— Maurice Brinton

Herein is attempted a critique of the parliamentary and state-based solutions to the problems of capitalism advocated for by social democrats, liberals, and even many Leftists. Also is attempted an outline of alternatives to said state-based solutions. These alternatives embody the ideals of prefiguration — building the new society in the shell of the old — and, in the writer’s opinion, go to the root of things. They are in that sense radical as opposed to reformist solutions.

Social Democracy, Liberalism, the State and Labor Relations

There is an over-emphasis, even in anarchist discourse, on nationalization, the involvement of the state in labour relations, and on welfare state reformism as solutions to the problems of capitalism. While the protections these things can provide are important, they are ultimately tools of legitimization of, habituation to, the evils of capitalism and the nation-state.

The legitimizing function of such reforms can be observed in the words of Justin Trudeau during an address to the Business Council of Canada. Discussing his proposal for a minor tax increase on the Canadian bourgeoisie, Trudeau explains how such a tax increase, while uncomfortable for the rich, is proposed with their well-being in mind, as a means of keeping the public from entertaining “more radical options.”¹

The surprisingly widespread support for a carbon tax amongst the ranks of the Canadian bourgeoisie can also be understood when looked at in this way. A carbon tax legitimizes ecocidal industrial growth and the ongoing use and destruction of Indigenous land by settler-colonial capitalism. After “losing the battle” on whether or not climate change is occurring, the Canadian bourgeoisie decided to shift tactics and gain control over the reaction to it. They chose lukewarm regulations.

In his address to the Calgary Petroleum Club, Trudeau criticized the Harper government’s refusal to implement such regulations: “If we had stronger environmental policy in this country — stronger oversight, tougher penalties, and yes, some sort of means to price carbon pollution — then I believe the Keystone XL pipeline would have been approved already.”² Unsurprisingly, for the sake of protecting “competitiveness,” exemptions for up to 80% of their emissions were allowed to some industries, with some like cement producers getting exempted on as much as 90%.³

Staughton Lynd, discussing the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the National Labour Relations Act and the National Labour Relations Board (classics of the New Deal era in the United States), describes how worker autonomy was eroded by enforced union

¹ Martin Lukacs, *The Trudeau Formula*, 17.

² *Ibid.* 112.

³ *Ibid.* 125–6.

membership, bureaucratization, legal monopolies, and a hierarchical structure that left management unaccountable to the rank-and-file union members.

Members of organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) expressed reservations about the development away from horizontal forms of organization to bureaucratic regulation which would, in the words of Mary van Kleeck of the ACLU, “only serve to check the rising power of the exponents of human rights, and indeed to protect private property rights...” While acknowledging that the Act would appear to protect the right of workers to strike, van Kleeck said that through it “pressures would inevitably be exerted” on the government to discourage strikes and other worker initiatives.⁴

Quoting Roger Baldwin, then-president of the ACLU, Lynd explains how government intervention in labour relations will ultimately favor the capitalist class at the expense of the workers. Baldwin said that wherever government intervention occurred there was nothing more than “conciliation” and “arbitration.” Worker initiative and class struggle is displaced by union management concerned with nothing more than their own place in the hierarchy, union lawyers, capital, and the idea of harmony between workers and capitalists.⁵

Iain McKay challenges the idea of state-based solutions and reforms in a discussion of Peter Kropotkin’s views on nationalization. Kropotkin criticized the advocacy for nationalization of the railways. Rather, workers (and the communities through which the trains and their tracks run) must take direct control of the railways.

Advocacy for nationalization is still, if not more, common — even among anarchists like Noam Chomsky who advocates for things like the nationalization of the auto industry. The question, “Privatization or Nationalization?,” limits the scope of discussion and is nothing more than a question of who our bosses should be: Capitalists or bureaucrats? It is a false dichotomy. We should oppose both.

To be clear, building codes, environmental and workplace safety regulations have done good and it’s not being suggested here that we abolish said regulations without building social institutions that empower workers and communities which can then fill the role of said regulations while also constituting a base from which radical change can be effected. What is being suggested here is that we learn how to think outside the confines of this liberal and social democratic framework of state-based, reformist solutions. We need to move on to a more radical set of solutions and these solutions lie outside the realm of the state as well as the market.

McKay uses the example of the Tory government in England during the mid-1980s to highlight the issues with state involvement in labour relations. Would the Tories have been able to use the welfare state against the striking miners in 1984–5 if independent miners’ unions were the ones in control of their pensions? He also asks whether or not the Tories, ruling during the austerity years from 2010 onward, could have “weaponized the benefits system against claimants if that function were in the hands of workers’ unions and cooperatives.”⁶ Here we see the validity of van Kleeck’s and Baldwin’s concerns about state involvement in labour relations.

As has been said, the idea here is not to abolish social assistance, universal healthcare, workplace safety regulations, civil rights laws, etc and to let almost completely disorganized workers fight a losing battle against an impressively organized capitalist class. The idea is that, rather than

⁴ Staughton Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ Iain McKay, *Reality Has a Well-Known Libertarian Bias*, 50–1.

focussing so heavily on people like Bernie Sanders, political parties like the Greens and the NDP, and on calls to nationalize industries or expand the welfare state, the focus of our theory and practice must be on organizing in our workplaces and communities and federating with other groups on a regional, national, and international basis. The focus must be on institutions that emphasize the autonomy of workers, communities, and individuals through consensus-based and directly democratic social institutions. The emphasis needs to be on the direct participation of individuals, organized into voluntary association with one another, in the construction of our everyday lives. This is where our energies must be directed — rather than into party-politics and other bureaucratic, parliamentary channels.

Rather than focusing on advocacy for the widening of social safety nets, we need to be abolishing the welfare state from below *by rendering it unnecessary through the creation of our own institutions of mutual aid and economic self-management*. The focus must be on self-organization, rather than on advocacy for politicians and reformist legislation:

“The real need is to concentrate on the positive task of building the alternative (both in people’s minds and in reality), namely autonomous job organizations, linked to others in the same industry and elsewhere, and controlled from below.”⁷

This would include things like workers’ and neighborhood assemblies, regional, national, and international federations of workers through a system of elected and recallable delegates, tool libraries, increased localization of production and expansion of the commons through the use of permaculture and urban farming, the reintroduction of the gift into everyday life, etc. We need to provide people with places in which we can exist socially and individually, places in which we can freely create culture, develop our identities, seek support, places in which social life isn’t mediated by capital and state power — by hierarchy.

While we ought to pressure the state into maintaining the regulations and social programs that protect us, to some degree, from the violence and exploitation inherent in capitalism, we need to hollow out the state and market by organizing ourselves and taking control of the economy and social life into our own hands. Working conditions should be managed and monitored by workers and confederations of unions and labour councils, community social life should be managed by the members of the community and federations of communities.

Appeals to state regulation, mediation, and arbitration have done good, in their way, but ultimately fail as a means of empowering individuals and communities as well as managing social crises. They are a means of reducing the consciousness of our social position as the subjects of capital and bureaucrats. The over-emphasis on taxing the rich and regulating industry keeps us from thinking outside of the hierarchical framework of the nation-state and the capitalist mode of production. Whether it’s fighting for an ecologically sustainable system, the destruction of white supremacy and cis-heterosexual patriarchy, safe working conditions, a secure retirement, safe food and housing, or whatever else, ultimately the state cannot be looked to for help. We need to look to ourselves and each other if our concern is the construction of a liberated society. We need to organize our communities and workplaces *ourselves*.

State-based solutions can never solve the problems created by capitalism. Take an extreme example: As agricultural production in the global South becomes more and more industrialized, billions of rural workers will be forced to migrate to the city. This is exactly what occurred

⁷ Maurice Brinton, *As We Don’t See it*.

in Europe during the Industrial revolution and it is now occurring on a global scale, but this time it's being directed by international organizations like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. The industrialization of agriculture on the scale planned by these organizations will reduce the global rural workforce to twenty million — *from three billion*. These 2.98 billion workers will be forced to migrate to already-cramped cities and shantytowns where they'll likely struggle to find decent, secure employment, housing, etc. There's no "New World" to colonize and settle in, no Americas (as there was during the Industrial Revolution) for these people to flee to this time around.

John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney say that "the kind of reduction in peasant population currently pushed by the system points, if it were effected fully, to mass genocide."⁸ These are problems beyond the toolkit of the state and the market. The kinds of resolutions that these two social institutions can produce would lead (and currently do), as Foster and McChesney say, to genocide.

A Brief Philosophical Digression

The above is a materially based critique of the state as a means of solving the problems which arise from the contradictions of capitalism. But before moving on to a discussion of possible solutions, I'm going to pair the material critique with a philosophical one. Through a discussion of identity, the commons, and the labor process I will outline a socialist — an anarchist and communist — philosophical vision. This vision is completely opposed to the liberal philosophy of property, the abstract individual, the separation of humans from nature, and alienated labor upon which the modern nation-state and capitalism are built. These are the ideas which form the basis of the solutions I'll propose below.

Concerning Identity and Hierarchy

I will start by introducing three concepts: spontaneity, unfinalizability, and the master/slave dialectic.

Spontaneity:

Murray Bookchin defines "spontaneity" as the freedom of "every development... to find its own equilibrium... Spontaneity, far from inviting chaos, involves releasing the inner forces of a development to find their authentic order and stability."⁹ Note that the stability Bookchin refers to is not stability in the sense of a static, unchanging state but of a balanced process of ongoing transformation. As he says, "Being is becoming."¹⁰ "Spontaneity is not mere impulse... Spontaneity is behavior, feeling, and *thought* that is free of *external* constraint, of *imposed* restriction."¹¹

⁸ John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney, *The Global Reserve Army of Labour*.

⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, xii.

¹⁰ Murray Bookchin, *Desire and Need*.

¹¹ Murray Bookchin, *On Spontaneity and Organization*.

Unfinalizability:

Mikhail Bakhtin says that “[n]othing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.”¹² As far as individuals, communities, and society are concerned, this means that we are and will always be changing, growing, developing, and deepening our senses of ourselves and the world, piling memory on memory and reflecting, acting, wondering, and thereby changing who we are at every moment. We are never finished making ourselves, making each other. This is what is meant by “unfinalizability.” There is no finale. “Being is becoming.”

Master/slave dialectic:

To understand what kind of social institutions are necessary to allow this kind of identity formation to occur, we can look to Glenn Sean Coulthard’s discussion of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Coulthard says that one way of reading this dialectic is as

“a theory of identity formation that cuts against the classical liberal view of the subject insofar as it situates social relations at the fore of human subjectivity. On this account, relations of recognition are deemed ‘constitutive of subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by another subject.’ *Our senses of self are thus dependent on and shaped through our complex relations with others.* This insight into the intersubjective nature of identity formation underlies Hegel’s often quoted assertion that ‘self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.’”¹³

On the second way of reading Hegel’s discussion of this dialectical relationship, Coulthard discusses how Hegel was describing the conditions necessary for the existence of a free society. With the master/slave dialectic, he

“suggests that the realization of oneself as an essential, self-determining agent requires that one not only be recognized as self-determining, but that one be recognized by another self-consciousness that is also recognized as self-determining. It is through these reciprocal processes and exchanges of recognition that the condition of possibility for freedom emerges.”¹⁴

Individuals in a hierarchical relationship with one another cannot “recognize” each other. To a “master,” regardless of what kind of master (king, lord, patriarch, capitalist, etc.), the “slaves” recognition “hardly constitutes recognition at all.” And the master can only see the slave as a slave, not an individual, an unfinalizable, three-dimensional being. Recognition is impossible. In a hierarchical system, the intersubjective formation of individual identity cannot occur.¹⁵ People are

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 166.

¹³ Glenn Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*, 27–8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

frozen into essentialized categories and situated into relatively static relationships of command and obedience wherein differences between people are framed in terms of superiority-inferiority rather than as complementarities.

This is as true of capitalism as any other hierarchical form of social organization. For all the talk about capitalism and individualism, “[c]apitalism does not produce individuals; it produces atomized egoists.”¹⁶ Capitalism, and hierarchical society in general, produces socially stunted, disconnected monads who are “reduced more and more to the level of button-pushing, lever-pressing machines.”¹⁷

Our identities are open-ended, unfinalizable. The social institutions we create and the conceptual frameworks we use to understand ourselves, our world, and each other must be tailored to this reality. They must be flexible and designed to accommodate the release of the inner forces that drive this unfinalizable process of spontaneous, intersubjective identity formation. Hierarchical society precludes this. An anti-hierarchical society is necessary for the healthy development of society and the individuals which constitute it.

The Commons, Labour, and the Gift

Before I discuss my ideas concerning the commons and labour — which are heavily influenced by my reading of Glenn Sean Coulthard and Murray Bookchin’s discussion of a study of an Aivilingmiut Inuit community — I’ll emphasize that we must be careful with white-settler interpretations of non-white sociocultural groups and their ideas (including the interpretations provided by myself). We must also be on guard against the racist and colonialist tendency to reduce different sociocultural groups to a single, monolithic entity or to characterize Indigenous people as “noble savages.” I’m merely attempting to elucidate a more ecologically and socially healthy way of understanding our relationship to the ecosystems we inhabit. I’m not attempting to represent any specific Indigenous individual’s or culture’s way of seeing the world as I’m not even remotely equipped to do so.

The Commons:

The commons are an eco-social institution in which people can access resources and create culture collectively — freed from the cold calculation and inhumanity of the atomizing market and property relations — and experience the world and society unmediated by the logic of capital accumulation with the accompanying violence and bureaucracy.

Glenn Sean Coulthard outlines what is, in my mind, the key to the logic of the commons. He describes a way of thinking about land/place not as property but as a “field of ‘relationships of things to each other...’”:

“Place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place. This, I argue, is precisely the understanding of land that grounded our [a group of Dene activists in the North West Territories] critique of colonialism and capitalism in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the Weledeh dialect of Dogrib (which

¹⁶ Murray Bookchin, *On Spontaneity and Organization*;

¹⁷ Maurice Brinton, *Revolutionary Organization*.

is my community's language), for example, "land" (or *dè*) is translated in relational terms as that which encompasses not only the land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on. Seen in this light, we are as much a part of the land as any other element."¹⁸

Land is seen here, contrary to the liberal conceptions of ownership and property, in terms of a reciprocal relationship between all of the organic and inorganic phenomena that exist in an ecosystem. Human identity, social and individual, is ecologized. It is continuous with the land.

Coulthard illustrates all of this by relating a story told to him about a man named Edward:

"Edward was hunting near a small river when he heard a raven croaking, far off to his left. Ravens can't kill animals themselves, so they depend on hunters and wolves to kill food for them. Flying high in the sky, they spot animals too far away for hunters or wolves to see. They then fly to the hunter and attract his attention by croaking loudly, then fly back to where the animals are. Edward stopped and watched the raven carefully. It made two trips back and forth in the same direction. Edward made a sharp turn and walked to where the raven was flying. There were no moose tracks, but he kept following the raven. When he got to the riverbank and looked down, Edward saw two big moose feeding on the bank. He shot them, skinned them, and covered the meat with their hides. Before he left, Edward put some fat meat out on the snow for the raven. He knew that without the bird, he wouldn't have killed any meat that day."

Labor:

In René Dubos' description of how an Aivilingmiut Inuit ivory carver worked, we can begin to see the ways in which our ideas about work can be changed by these ways of thinking about the world and human identity:

"The carver rarely set out consciously to shape a particular form. Instead of compelling the fragment of ivory to become a man, a child, a wolf, a seal, a baby walrus, or some other preconceived object, he tried subconsciously to discover the structural characteristics and patterns inherent in the material itself. He continuously let his hand be guided by the inner structure of the ivory as it revealed itself to the knife. The form of the human being or animal did not have to be created; it was there from the beginning and only had to be released."¹⁹

From the liberal notions of the extraction of resources, as some kind of antagonistic struggle against nature, and the generation of market-value, labor is transformed by all of these ideas into a "revelation as well as realization, a synchronicity of subject and object."²⁰ Labour becomes a metabolic process which regulates the relationship between our identities and the land/place.

In the example of the Aivilingmiut carver, we can also see what people like John Ruskin, Elisée Reclus, and William Morris meant when they talked about liberated/non-alienated labour as art:

¹⁸ Glenn Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Mask*, 61.

¹⁹ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

“As soon as labour impassions, as soon as it gives joy, the toiler becomes an artist.”²¹ This kind of labour involves a mixing of oneself with the materials and the product of labor contains part of your being. The product is a physical result of the mixing of yourself with the world around you. The product becomes an extension of who you are.

This kind of “impassioned labour” could never exist in a setting of compulsion and domination or within the non-reciprocal, alienating context of property relations, the market and the commodity, the state, and hierarchy in general.

The Gift:

Fundamental to the commons is the logic of the gift. The gift is the foundation and materialization of all genuinely *social* relationships. Gifts are a means through which emotions and ideas about people can be expressed: “I saw this and thought of you.” Gifts are the material means by which we recognize one another. When land is understood as a reciprocal relationship, labour is art, and the gift is released from the isolation of holidays and special occasions imposed upon it by the market, gift-giving becomes a way of giving a piece of yourself to another person. It is through the gift that social relationships are created and renewed.

The anthropologist Laura Bohannan describes being given gifts when she arrived in a Tiv community in Nigeria. She was told that the appropriate response to a gift was to herself give a gift but that the return-gift must be of either less or more value than the initial gift. “To bring back nothing at all would be to cast oneself as an exploiter or a parasite.” David Graeber says that

“to bring back an exact equivalent would be to suggest that one no longer wishes to have anything to do with the neighbor. Tiv women, Bohannan learned, might spend a good part of the day walking for miles to distant homesteads to return a handful of okra or a tiny bit of change, ‘in an endless circle of gifts to which no one ever handed over the precise value of the object last received’ — and in doing so, they were continually creating their society.”²²

Another example of the role gifts play in the creation and maintenance of society and identity is noted by Cordelia Fine in her discussion of the role of gift giving in Nazi concentration camps:

“The main motivation to give gifts in this powerfully ‘identity stripping context’... was to assert agency, to form and re-establish social identities through relationships, and to restore a sense of humanity. In humans, gifts ‘reveal an important secret: the idea which the recipient evokes in the imagination of the giver’ as one scholar put it.”²³

To remove the gift so thoroughly from society, to isolate it within a few holidays and special occasions, and to fill the emptiness left in its place with the commodity form is to remove a fundamental vehicle of recognition. The dense and complex social networks materially maintained by the gift are replaced with the market and its atomized individual egos.

²¹ Elisée Reclus quoted by Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, 64.

²² Laura Bohannan quoted in David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, 105.

²³ Cordelia Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, 64.

Outside of the State and the Market

So, if we can't rely on statist solutions to the kinds of problems raised by the material limitations and the philosophical understandings discussed above, what kinds of solutions can we rely on? What would a society that allows for recognition look like? What kinds of social institutions would encourage the ongoing, intersubjective construction of our identities and an ecologically sensitive relationship with nonhuman nature? What kinds of institutions would take us beyond a world in which "people are reduced more and more to the role of button pushers, lever pressing machines" and into one wherein labour becomes art?²⁴

The answer is "a society based on self-management in which each individual participates fully, directly, and in complete equality in the unmediated management of the collectivity."²⁵

Before going into more detail about how to effect this unmediated management, I'll emphasize that what I describe below are only suggestions. Some of them have a long history, dating back to the 19th century, some even further back in time. But keep the words of the Friends of Aron Baron in mind while reading: "Real revolutions are never staged, *they don't happen according to any theorist's timetable.*"

Radical Workers' and Neighborhood Organizations

One of the most important structures you'll see discussed by anarchists, socialists, and Marxists is workers' and neighborhood assemblies built around a mixture of consensus-based decision making and direct democracy. These assemblies would be in control of production, distribution, and general community life.

How would these organs of radical self-management function? Individual workplaces would be run by workers' assemblies in which all workers can participate. In terms of specific occupations, workers organize locally and confederate on a regional, national, and international basis by trade. So, if you're a carpenter (and wish to be a member) you're organized into a carpenter's union (an "autonomous job association") that federates with other carpenters' unions in different areas. Workers would also be organized into local labour councils that gather workers from all sectors of the local economy. These councils are likewise federated with other councils on the regional, national, and international level. Assemblies, unions, councils, and federations thereof would implement a consensus-based and directly democratic system of management. This allows for as much unmediated participation in economic life as is possible. Where regional, national, and international meetings of workers are concerned, elected and immediately recallable delegates are sent by the workers and community to share statistics concerning production and other relevant information to the other delegates. Delegates make no decisions independently of the workers. Modern communication technology would make this kind of a system relatively easy to implement once the workers coherently organize.²⁶ For more comprehensive, historically-grounded discussions of these ideas see *Workers' Councils* by Cornelius Castoriadis, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* by Rudolf Rocker, *Workers' Councils* by Anton Pannekoek, as

²⁴ Maurice Brinton, *Revolutionary Organization*.

²⁵ Murray Bookchin, *On Spontaneity and Organization*.

²⁶ *Anarcho-Syndicalism — Theory and Practice*, 73–88.

well as Sam Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives*, and *Anarchism and Workers' Self-Management in Revolutionary Spain* by Frank Mintz.

Neighborhood assemblies would function in much the same way. As well as a general neighborhood assembly — similar to the labour council — comprised of all the members of a community, there would be special assemblies consisting of various members with unique shared traits ie neurodivergent individuals, people with physical disabilities, racial, religious, sexual, and gender minorities who experience forms of exploitation and violence relatively unique to their group. Likely federations of these different assemblies could provide support against bigotry exercised against any of the other assemblies. For example, if there is a significant contingent of antisemitic people in a community, members of the other assemblies could band together with and support/protect the Jewish members of the community.

These neighborhood assemblies would likely federate with others and coordinate inter-community events such as sports tournaments, trade competitions, festivals and carnivals, potlucks, community holidays, etc. This kind of inter-communal celebration and good-spirited competition would diminish the risk of parochialism by expanding social relationships beyond the immediate community, providing a foundation for inter-communal solidarity.

The Commons

The reconstruction of the commons is another solution often proposed by Leftists.

The commons can take many forms, one of which is the tool library wherein people can borrow tools. Related to the tool library, are “gift networks” in which people can post jobs they need done or things they need on pasteboards at community centers or in online forums. People can volunteer to provide the required service for free, knowing that when they need something in the future, they can likely find someone to help them out in the same way.

Note, though, that this goes beyond a calculating “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine” mentality. Beyond the calculation of favors, there is a deeper understanding of the social nature of our identities, the “intersubjectivity of subjectivity.” Our well-being as well as our sense of self is tied up with the well-being and sense of self of others in a way that transcends petty-minded calculation of individual benefits and costs. For example, a parent doesn’t perform cost-benefit analyses before they feed their child. While you can’t expect the same level of commitment a parent has to their child from strangers, acquaintances, or even close friends, the point is that once we start building the new society in the shell of the old, a similar kind of dedication to and sense of responsibility for the well-being of the individual members of the human family will emerge.

This view is premised on the idea that individual freedom is impossible without collective freedom and vice versa, which is the foundation upon which much of socialist thought is built. In his discussion of the medieval European communes, Rocker says that when “the individual feels himself an independent member of society; [a society] which makes his work fruitful, gives wings to his spirit and prevents his mental stagnation” a communal spirit is generated. “In such a social environment man feels free in his decisions, although intergrown in countless ways with the community. It is this very freedom of associations which gives force and character to his personality and moral content to his will. He carries the ‘law of the association’ in his own breast, and hence any external compulsion appears to him senseless and incomprehensible. *He*

*feels, however, the full responsibility arising from his social relations with his fellowmen, and he makes it the basis of his personal conduct.”*²⁷

Another kind of commons is the permaculture park — although this solution would be difficult to implement in a city or in places without a well-organized group of people. The permaculture park is essentially a large communal garden grown using the principles of permaculture (see *Gaia’s Garden* by Toby Hemenway, *Restoration Agriculture* by Mark Shepard, or *An Introduction to Permaculture* by Bill Mollison). In the park there could be fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, herbs, fire-pits, and fish-ponds. People can pick the food and catch the fish, cook using cookery provided at the park, all free of charge. Along with cookery to borrow, there are guitars, drums, paints and canvas, books, chairs, hammocks, etc. which are all likewise free to be taken into the park. A permaculture park is a place wherein people can exist individually and socially in an ecologically rich setting, wherein they can create culture, nap, read, eat, etc. freed from the strict, exacting logic of the marketplace.

Another version of a commons is exemplified by the old Wobbly halls of the early and mid-20th century, where members of the IWW congregated. Here we can see the living continuity of radical workers’ institutions like workers’ assemblies with the commons and the logic of the gift.

In these halls, members of the IWW discussed both practical matters concerning strikes, other direct actions, and conditions on the job, as well as politics, economics, and their everyday lives. They sang songs, made art, read books, and hosted classes. In these halls they talked with one another, became friends, taught one another, and directly participated in the creation of society and culture.

It’s important to emphasize this side of workers’ and neighborhood assemblies. These aren’t supposed to be boring places where one person rattles off statistics and theory, while the others listen quietly, vote, and then go home. To be sure, they won’t always be fun and exciting, and serious matters will be discussed seriously and boringly but the journalist and author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, John Reed had this to say about them:

“wherever... there is an IWW local, you will find an intellectual center – a place where men read philosophy, the latest plays, novels; where art and poetry are discussed, and international politics. In my native place, Portland, Oregon, the IWW hall was the liveliest intellectual center in town.”²⁸

However, these weren’t places filled with detached intellectuals. Many of these people were migrant workers (“hobos”) and the kinds of people who today you’d find standing behind a cash register at Wal Mart or the liquor store. These were places where you could meet with friends and like-minded people with direct experience of capitalist exploitation and violence. They were “place[s] to relax without having to eat, drink, or buy anything.” In the evenings there was often music, dancing, and plays.²⁹ One Wobbly says that besides just searching for jobs, they were “also searching for something to satisfy [their] emotional desire for grandeur and beauty.”³⁰

These were cultural and educational centers, as well as centers for the direct struggle against capitalism. A St. Louis Post Dispatch reporter describes hearing coal miners “talk” philosophy,

²⁷ Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 90–1.

²⁸ John Reed quoted by Frank Rosemont, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

literature, psychology and science in such a way as to “put to shame the cultural pretensions of many persons who live in fine houses and drive the latest models of high-priced cars.”³¹

Something similar can be observed by looking to the anarchists in Spain. Many of the Spanish anarchists of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s organized night-schools where illiterate workers could learn to read, listen to talks about Darwin’s theory of evolution, and other scientific, sociological, political, and historical subjects. Today this might look like classes on renewable energy, open-source technology, home repairs, and gardening as well as history, sociology, science and ecology, and economics.

Bookchin writes that during the time of the First International, the workers’ centers in Spain (which later took on the function of local union offices of the National Confederation of Labour) “were not merely the local offices of the union; they were also meeting places and cultural centers where members went to exchange ideas, read, and attend classes.”³²

A Brief Note on Violence

Before moving on to the last suggestion, the inevitable role that will be played by violent resistance must be noted. As Maurice Brinton says: “No ruling class in history has ever surrendered its dominant position in the economy and its control of the State without ferocious struggle.”³³ The capitalist class has never let us occupy factories, organize (general) strikes, protest pipeline construction, etc. Everywhere you look, individuals and communities are met with police and military when they try to take their lives into their own hands, protect the environment from capitalism and the nation-state, or resist white supremacy. There will be (and is) fighting but the fighting will never be enough if we don’t have coherent, integrated, autonomous organizations: “The Party’s power may grow out of the barrel of a gun. The power of the working class grows out of its management of the economy and of society as a whole.”

The General Strike

For my final suggestion, I’ll discuss the general strike. Emma Goldman called this the “supreme expression of the economic consciousness of the workers.”³⁴ To put it simply, this is a strike in which all non-essential services are stopped.

There was one in Winnipeg in 1919 in which 30 000 people stopped working. The strike contributed to the build-up of strength in Canadian labour unions as well as the development of social democracy in Canada — a good example of how reforms are more often used as de-radicalizing concessions, rather than victories achieved by voting or resulting from the benevolence of politicians and capitalists. As has already been pointed out, they’re a response designed to keep us from “entertaining more radical solutions.”

Seattle also saw a general strike in 1919. The city stopped working and essential services were organized by the striking workers. Fire fighters agreed to stay on the job, laundry workers handled hospital laundry, “[t]hirty-five neighbourhood milk stations were set up. Every day thirty

³¹ Ibid, 34–5.

³² Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868–1936*.

³³ Maurice Brinton, *Socialism Reaffirmed*.

³⁴ Emma Goldman, *Anarchism: What It Really Stands For*.

thousand meals were prepared in large kitchens, then transported to halls all over the city and served cafeteria style, with strikers paying twenty-five cents a meal, the general public thirty-five cents. People were allowed to eat as much as they wanted of the beef stew, spaghetti, bread, and coffee.” A “labour war veterans guard” was organized to keep people safe. Above their headquarters was written:

“The purpose of this organisation is to preserve law and order without the use of force. No volunteer will have any police power or be allowed to carry weapons of any sort, but to use persuasion only.”

During this strike, crime in the city decreased and the commander of the US army detachment sent to the city said that in his forty years of military experience he had never seen a more quiet and orderly city.³⁵

The general strike, as well as the ordinary, smaller-scale strike, is a means by which workers can exercise their economic power, realize their role as the true producers of social wealth (alongside members of communities renewing society through the gift, mutual aid, etc) and apply pressure to gain economic concessions such as higher wages or reduced working hours. It can also be used as a means of achieving political goals, such as the freeing of political prisoners. “At one blow it brings the whole economic system to a standstill and shakes it to its foundations.”³⁶

The general strike will be central to the social revolution. It is the workers’ “strongest weapon in the struggle for liberation.”³⁷ Through strikes and especially general strikes, workers can come to a more coherent sense of their role in society and cultivate, through direct experience of our own power, the kind of solidarity which is the necessary foundation of a freer world. As the examples above show, the general strike provides workers and communities with an opportunity to realize their capacity for autonomous organization of social life on our own terms.

Closing Thoughts

We would do well to remember the words of Karl Marx: “If the working class wishes to continue its struggle with some chance of success the national organizations must become international.” Peter Kropotkin expressed the same sentiment when he said that social reconstruction requires the “cooperation of the labouring classes of all nations” and “for that purpose the idea of a great International of all working people of the world must be renewed... there must be a Union of all the Trade Unions of the world – of all those who produce the wealth of the world – united, in order to free the production of the world from its present enslavement to Capital.”³⁸

As Maurice Brinton says in *Socialism Reaffirmed*:

“The class needs a revolutionary organization, not as its self-appointed leadership but as an instrument of its struggle. The organization should assist workers in dispute, help through its press to generalize working class experience, provide a frame-

³⁵ Libcom.org, 1919: The Seattle General Strike (edited from ‘Self Help in Hard Times’ Chapter 15 of A People’s History of the United States, by Howard Zinn.).

³⁶ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, 82.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

³⁸ Peter Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 34.

work for linking up autonomous organs of working class struggle and constantly stress the ideas and revolutionary potentialities of independent mass action.

The structure of the organization should reflect the highest achievements of working class struggle (i.e. workers' councils) rather than imitate capitalist types of organization. It should anticipate the socialist future of society rather than mirror its capitalist past. In practice this means:

- that local organs have the fullest autonomy, in relation to their own activities, that is in keeping with the general purpose and outlook of the organization;
- that direct democracy (i.e. the collective decision of all those concerned) is resorted to wherever materially possible;
- that all central bodies having power of decision involving others should be constituted by delegates, these being elected by those they represent and revocable by them, at any time.”³⁹

That being said, let's not forget that it's not only workers who “produce the wealth of the world.” As David Graeber says about the “non-industrious poor”: “Insofar as the time they are taking off from work is being spent with friends and family, enjoying and caring for those they love, they're probably improving the world more than we acknowledge.”⁴⁰ Social wealth isn't just about production, just as the gift isn't only about wrapped presents, Christmas, and birthdays. Social wealth is about “enjoying and caring for those you love,” creating and maintaining ecologically grounded social relationships and creating spaces that give people the freedom to develop themselves healthfully and autonomously — spontaneously.

For any of what's been discussed here to work, our sense of ourselves as Canadians, Americans, or whatever other national identity, will have to be abandoned. To create a freer society — a classless, moneyless, stateless society — we'll need to forget national identity. We aren't Canadians, we're human beings who were “born on a planet called earth.” None of what I described here can work if we believe we have more in common with the CEO's of firms like Barrick Gold or Garda World than with the peasants and workers they murder with private security firms.

This goes for everything else as well. The domination of women in patriarchal society, of transgender people by cis-heteronormativity, of black and indigenous people by white supremacism and settler-colonialism, of workers by capitalists, and the whole of hierarchical society which we have been raised to believe is necessary to maintain order and peace. We must relentlessly fight back against and unlearn all bigoted forms of thought and behavior. All of the above requires anti-racism, antifascism, decolonization, anti-imperialism, internationalism, trans-inclusive feminism, and anti-ableism to be practicable.

Rudolf Rocker, quoting a famous German dramatist, says that “we can't fall out of this world” and that “this utterance constantly reminds us of the Essential and Universal which unite all human beings with one another and which, in spite of all the peculiarities arising from differences in climate and in external conditions of life, quite harmonize the inner equilibrium between the different human groups. We are all children of this earth.”⁴¹

³⁹ Maurice Brinton, *Socialism Reaffirmed*.

⁴⁰ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, 390.

⁴¹ Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 435–6.

The only way for us to accomplish all of this, to overcome the state form of social organization, the use of markets as a means of distributing material social wealth, and hierarchical society in general, is through our own efforts. As Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson say, a liberated society “cannot come from idealistic (and ultimately empty) representations of political heroes and saviors. Our ideas of what freedom and liberation mean to us must rest on something sturdier than the shoulders of charismatic and seemingly progressive politicians. *We must define those for ourselves.*”⁴²

Despite how impossible all of the above may sound, as Harold Barclay puts it:

“That a truly free society may never be attained — or if achieved would have the most tenuous life — is clearly no excuse to abandon the struggle. If we resign ourselves to what is, there would hardly be much point in living.”⁴³

Further Reading

Indigenous Writes by Chelsea Vowel

Surviving Canada: Indigenous Peoples Celebrate 150 Years of Betrayal edited by Kiera L. Ladner and Myra J. Tait

Red Skin, White Masks by Glenn Sean Coulthard

Testosterone Rex by Cordelia Fine

Whipping Girl by Julia Serano

Look For Me In The Whirlwind edited by déqui kioni-sadiki and Matt Meyer

As Black As Resistance by Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson

Anarchy Works by Peter Gelderloos

Anarchism and Other Essays by Emma Goldman

The Collected Speeches and Writings of Lucy Parsons

Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice by Rudolf Rocker

Workers' Councils by Anton Pannekoek

For Workers' Power by Maurice Brinton

The Trudeau Formula by Martin Lukacs

Policing Black Lives by Robyn Maynard

⁴² Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson, *As Black As Resistance*, 18.

⁴³ Harold Barclay, *Culture and Anarchy*, 101.

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