

The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development

Volume 3

Issue 1 *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development*

Article 6

2017

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Recommended Citation

McGiffen, Steve and Clairzier, Patrick (2017) "Confronting Capitalism: Traditional Movements & Alternatives," *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/vol3/iss1/6>

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Confronting Capitalism: Traditional Movements & Alternatives

Steve McGiffen
Patrick Clairzier

Abstract

Capitalism has developed into a dangerous hindrance to any possibility of human progress, if ‘progress’ is defined not by the availability of ever more impressive gadgetry, but by a reduction in poverty, the spreading of prosperity and the conservation of a livable environment. Clearly, the left project in the 20th century was partially successful in raising living standards, and access to basic services such as health care and education in developed countries and for many elsewhere. However, these achievements are now under threat. Moreover, the broader capitalist narrative states there are no alternatives to this system and any endeavor that focuses on the common good or collective action as an organizing principle for society is undemocratic, unnatural and foolishly utopian and will not work. Thus, our goal in preparing this paper is to propose ways in which both traditional and novel forms of organization might be employed in the struggle to replace capitalism with a more equitable system, one which does not rely on the exploitation of working people and the destruction of the environment.

Part One: Revitalizing traditional forms of resistance

Clearly, the left project did not succeed in the 20th century, but neither did it wholly fail. Living standards have risen in most of the world, access to basic services such as health care and education has improved for almost everyone in Europe’s developed countries and for many elsewhere.

However, these achievements are now under threat. They were not the main result of the work of philanthropists, but of the working class and its allies, of the labor movement, and of parliamentary democracy, itself won in the struggle of initially excluded groups: principally working class men, women from whatever class, and ethnic and religious minorities.

Throughout the developed world, the efforts of these people are being undermined. Access to education is becoming increasingly dependent on access to finance.ⁱ Health care is also becoming more restricted for those who cannot pay, even in a long-socialized system such as the UK’s National Health Service.ⁱⁱ In Britain, public libraries are being closed down everywhere, including in major citiesⁱⁱⁱ, and schools are often in a shocking state of repair, with head teachers warning that the system “could implode”. One head reported that she had had to cut her counselling services to such an extent that the only children who could still be included in what has shown itself to be a valuable, even life-saving service, are those who have attempted suicide. Short of that, troubled kids are on their own.^{iv} Though liberal newspapers such as the one in which this situation was highlighted continue to call for positive reforms, the social democratic welfare state, arguably the most impressive of humanity’s twentieth century achievements, is now routinely scorned in a more widely-read, hostile media.^v

The problem, however, is not solely that the neoliberal assault on the social achievements of the twentieth century is unrelenting. There is also the weakness of the resistance to be considered in any analysis of the changes in social and economic power relations since the 1970s. In that decade, in the face of emerging global crises and a precipitously declining rate of profit, the capitalist class was forced to abandon the social stability strategy which had followed the Second World War. Central to this strategy was the welfare state, even in the relatively weak form which it took in the US. The ruling

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elite were forced to turn instead to tactics capable of reducing both individual wages and the “social wage” provided by welfare systems, free state education, subsidized health care and so on.^{vi}

Mainstream economists identify three reasons for this decline. Firstly, there is “the decrease in the bargaining power of labor, due to changing labor market policies and a decline of the more unionized sectors.” Second comes “globalization and trade openness, with the resulting migration of relatively more labor-intensive sectors from advanced economies to emerging economies.” And thirdly there have been technological changes connected to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and these changes have “raised the marginal productivity and return to capital relative to labor.”^{vii}

The only way in which we differ from this basic analysis is in our view of its causes. Similarly to the way in which Andreas Malm argues that the switch to coal from water power which began in Britain’s manufacturing industries in the late 18th Century was not a result of straightforward economic calculation but rather a product of capitalism’s need to control and discipline its workforce^{viii}, our analysis indicates that the developments outlined above did not simply occur, but were in reality orchestrated by governments, international institutions and other powerful players. Their goal was to seek to shore up the rate of profit by pressuring workers into accepting cuts in both their individual wages and in the range of social rights and provision won over a long period of class struggle, particularly since World War Two. The description of the process offered by liberal economists such as Margaret Jacobson and Filippo Occhino, who authored the paper, published by the Cleveland Federal Reserve, cited above, make it sound inevitable; regrettable, perhaps, but nevertheless a consequence of neutral processes. Yet “the decrease in the bargaining power of labor, due to changing labor market policies and a decline of the more unionized sectors” is a heavily euphemistic account of the way in which the Thatcher and Reagan administrations spent the 1980s deliberately dismantling the legal frameworks which made labor unions potentially effective, while conservative media cheered them on, creating an image of unions as irresponsible, greedy and undemocratic. At the same time, while broad developments certainly favored the globalization of the economy, no attempt was made to maintain standards of living of working people in the face of it. Had it been handled in a very different way, globalization may have actually been to some extent the beneficial process which liberal commentators claim it to be^{ix}. Instead, it has made a major contribution to unemployment and poverty in developed and developing countries, taking the form of a ‘race to the bottom’ in which the main criteria for success are weak labor protection laws, lax environmental standards, and authoritarian practices both within and beyond the workplace.^x As for ICT, like almost all technologies, computer-based systems are politically neutral: their benefits and harmful effects depend not on some essential nature, but on decisions taken by men and women who might have chosen otherwise. The fact that they did not opt for a different course tells us little about globalization or ICT per se, and a great deal about the phase of capitalism we are in. Commonly referred to as ‘neoliberalism’, it is a phase which began in the late 1960s and which has seen not only the erosion of workers’ power to organize and negotiate – or force – improvements to their lot, but also a huge increase in capitalism’s destructive effects on the environment.^{xi}

Examination of these linked processes has led us to conclude, firstly, that new ways to confront capitalism must be found and old ways transformed if we are to halt this destruction. An umbrella term for these new ways is ‘ecosocialism’, which has been defined broadly as “the reasoned human answer to the double impasse in which humanity is now locked because of the modes of production and consumption of our times which are exhausting human beings and the environment.”^{xii}

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The first priority of any attempt to build a radical left movement for the twenty-first century, one capable of confronting capitalism, is therefore to recognize that social and environmental issues are inseparably linked and to construct our praxis accordingly. Environmentalism has for too long been an afterthought for any progressive movement which does not primarily direct its focus at “green” issues. For their part, almost all of the world’s Green parties have been drawn ever deeper into the system, losing any radical edge and exhibiting an increasingly conservative political culture.^{xiii} What is needed, however, is for progressive movements, whatever may be their immediate focus, to recognize that, as Jason W. Moore argues, “capitalism is more than an ‘economic’ system, and even more than a social system. It is a way of organizing nature.”^{xiv}

This way of organizing nature is necessarily conditioned by a central feature of capitalism, its literally insatiable appetite for accumulation and thus for growth. The need to satisfy this appetite makes capitalism by definition an exploitative system, exploitative of labor, but also of the natural environment. The need to unite the resistance to these separate but intimately linked forms of exploitation must be at the heart of any attempt to construct a radical left capable of challenging the dominant ideology and finding a way out of the current impasse.

It is not enough to attack capitalist practices such as the payment of poverty wages, or the rampant destruction it visits upon the global environment. Liberals also protest these things. However, in coming up with solutions which accept as unchangeable capitalist relations of production, distribution and consumption, they perpetuate the underlying problem.

Social ownership and a planned economy are concepts which stand in urgent need of rehabilitation. The failures and absurdities of past planned economies should not be taken as discrediting the concept itself, but should rather be taken as something from which we need to learn. We should, moreover, be examining how computer technologies might enable us to achieve an efficient and effective planned economy, reducing or eliminating waste and moving as rapidly as possible towards a carbon neutral system of production.^{xv} The use of the term ‘social ownership’ should be stressed in preference to ‘state ownership’. There are many forms of social ownership^{xvi} and while the ‘nationalized’ model may be appropriate for production requiring high levels of investment, cooperation through a variety of models of ownership, production and distribution offers the possibility of democratic control of production via collaboration of workers and consumers. We envisage a network of local, regional, national and international distribution networks which would work alongside small farmers’ groups and agricultural cooperatives and workers’ organizations towards a fair and efficient distribution of food and other vital commodities. Transition towns, local exchange systems including local currencies, workers’ ownership of their means of production, collective forms of transport and collective forms of child care are just some of the ideas put forward as both tools for the achievement of an economy based on social ownership and goals within that target. The kind of unnecessary work which characterizes consumerism should be eliminated along with forms of work and production which are socially or environmentally destructive. The labor power thus freed up could then be put to beneficial use. A social dividend or universal basic income could underpin such a system.

One leading politician whose thinking is moving in this direction is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who recorded close to 20% in the first round of the French presidential election of March 2017, narrowly missing the cut for the run-off. The ninth of his “18 theses for ecosocialism” argues the need for such a “complete overhaul of our system of production” and that this should be “based on what we call the ‘4 Rs’: relocalization of activity, ecological re-industrialization, restructuring of industrial facilities

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and redistribution of work.” The satisfaction of needs and - where possible and not socially destructive - desires could be addressed through “a restructured industry.... in personal services, in agroecology, in farming aimed at food sovereignty and health for all, in research and the ‘green’ sectors working at reducing our dependence on non-renewable resources.” As the thesis goes on to note “the need to create or preserve jobs is too often put forward against the imperative of environmental protection,” whereas “relocation and ecological transition would allow us to preserve, transform or create many jobs, both local and sustainable, in all countries.”^{xvii}

The question, as ever, is how we get “from here to there”. Clearly, we need effective organs of resistance, and just as clearly, the principle organs of resistance – labor unions and social democratic and other left political parties - are either in crisis or, at best, failing to gain support in the face of the crisis which capitalism is experiencing. In France, the Netherlands and Britain, to take just three of the most important examples, center-left parties are in crisis, though in each case this is in part due to, as well as one of the causes of, the rise of new left forces. At the same time, labor unions have seen their bargaining power eroded by the ease with which investment capital and what it pays for can be moved around the world, and by technological changes which have, along with delocalization, reduced and deskilled workforces, particularly in developed countries.

Under these circumstances, new forms of organization are clearly needed. As David Harvey has suggested, this ease of capital movement has led to a decentralization of capital. From this he argues that as the nature of the proletariat has changed – fast-food workers, for example, are now much more typical of the working class than are steelworkers or coalminers, at least in developed countries - we need to move away from the idea that the workplace is *the* central terrain on which capital and labor come head to head on a daily basis. Instead we must seek places and situations in which working people are bound by clear common interests: employed and unemployed, young and retired, gay and straight, and so on across existing divisions.^{xviii}

Of course, this applies mainly to developed countries afflicted by deindustrialization. The places to which jobs have moved are still bound by the factory system. In those countries, traditional forms of labor unionism may still be effective, though the tides of deindustrialization now seem to be sweeping jobs out of China and into lower-wage countries such as Bangladesh.^{xix} In developed countries, however, the transformation of the working lives of the mass of the population means that service workers are massively more numerous now than manufacturing workers.^{xx} Workplaces such as fast-food outlets and restaurants defy traditional forms of organizing, as do mobile jobs such as delivery driving and long distance road haulage. The modern economy also encourages workers, especially young workers, to move frequently from job to job and, where such jobs are low-skilled, this may mean from sector to sector. Under these circumstances, it may be that the workplace may not be the best unit of organization for the mass of the working population.

David Harvey suggests that the new unit of organization should be the neighborhood. This would have the advantage, as he points out, of offering “a better understanding of the sectoral understanding of workplace organizing.”^{xxi} On the other hand, in many US cities and a few in Europe, populations may be so segregated that neighborhood organization would not only fail to unite people across these often deep-rooted divisions, they would also reinforce existing suspicions and enmities. There are two solutions to this. The best one would be to break down segregation completely, so that everyone lives in mixed neighborhoods. There are many such neighborhoods now, of course, throughout Europe and even in the US. Where working people are separated from each other, however, there is a need for

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larger structures, city-wide and beyond, via which people can talk to each other and discuss common problems and how to address them in a way which is clearly and visibly rooted in mutual respect. This dialogue has the potential to offer a much more realistic platform for building a more powerful agent of radical social change than the traditional political party is likely to provide, unless parties can feed into it. Again, this must be done in a spirit of respect for differing views of how best to combat neoliberalism, as well as cultural and other differences within the movement. It is a process for which social media could prove very helpful.

Given the retreat of the state from many of the responsibilities it accepted in the wake of the Second World War, progressives have an opportunity to create networks of solidarity. This has the advantage of being a pragmatic approach capable of attracting support way beyond the left. Its disadvantage is that it can easily lead not only to something which may appear a form of charity, but to something which is just that in reality. Where does solidarity stop and charity start?

We would argue that the difference does indeed revolve around the concept of solidarity and, once again, of mutual respect. Grassroots organizing must take many forms, some of them combative, some less directly so. Radical organizations which pursue a range of different actions, some of which attack problems such as hunger directly, while others involve direct confrontation, cannot be mistaken for charitable bodies. Nobody ever mistook the Black Panthers for a sort of alternative Salvation Army as a result of their Breakfasts for Children program. Again, Harvey makes this point best when he says that “there has to be an anti-capitalist agenda, so that when the group works with people everybody knows that it is not only about helping them to cope but that there is an organized intent to politically change the system in its entirety.”^{xxii} This is not only transparent and honest, but more likely to prove attractive to those who are rightly suspicious of charity and charities. The dangers of shunning direct aid as “charity” may be illustrated by what has happened in Greece, where the far right Golden Dawn opened “Greeks only” soup kitchens.^{xxiii}

As Phil Hearse argues, the success of progressive politics, and thus the future of our own and many other species and our habitats, now depends on unifying struggles “for social justice and against climate catastrophe”. The poorer you are, the more you will suffer from the effects of global warming.^{xxiv} Poverty, whether individual or of a whole region or nation, leads to vulnerability in the face of flood, drought, fire and the whole range of hazards which climate change is bringing in its wake. The United Nations reported recently that

Weather-related disasters are becoming increasingly frequent, due largely to a sustained rise in the numbers of floods and storms. Flooding alone accounted for 47% of all weather-related disasters (1995-2015), affecting 2.3 billion people, the majority of whom (95%) live in Asia. While less frequent than flooding, storms were the most deadly type of weather-related disaster, killing more than 242,000 people in the past 21 years; that is 40% of the global total for all weather-related disasters. The vast majority of these deaths (89%) occurred in lower-income countries, even though they experienced just 26% of all storms.^{xxv}

Although climate change is an urgent issue in itself, one on which poor and working class communities, trade unions and progressive political parties need to focus, and around which they need to organize, it is also one which connects to many other global developments of interest to those who wish to combat inequality, poverty, and their attendant ills. War, migration, urban atmospheric

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pollution, the failure of the mainstream media to correctly represent these and other issues, these are all aspects of the broader problem of control of the means of production, not only production of goods and services, but production of ideas, ideologies, historical narratives, and education. It is this control which we must break by forging a movement capable of ensuring that Rosa Luxemburg’s question, ‘socialism or barbarism’, is answered in a positive and life-sustaining manner.

If we are to build a movement capable of challenging climate change and those responsible for, then it is vital that organized labor be drawn into it to the extent that labor unions begin to play a major role. This raises a broader issue, one which is absolutely central to the task of combating capitalism: the need to broaden labor unions’ priorities, moving away from the economism and conservatism exhibited by them in the US and to a lesser extent the UK and other countries in their response to the rise of neoliberalism. The 99%/1% dichotomy, the basis of a slogan popular across the left, is fine as far as it goes, but refers only to the unequal distribution of wealth, leaving deeper structural questions entirely out of the picture. Only by addressing ourselves and our movements, including labor unions and left parties, to these structural questions will we be able to combat not only climate change, but the system of organized exploitation and irresponsibility from which it has grown.

Part Two: Promoting Alternatives

Every society has a collection of myths, tales and historical accounts that not only explain the birth, nature, customs and norms of its people, but also serve to legitimize current social stratifications and create social cohesion. Without exception, this fact has held true throughout the history of Western societies. For example, in Plato’s Republic in a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Plato’s older brother, we are introduced to the concept of the “noble lie.” The noble lie is a “Phoenician tale” or supernatural fiction that speaks to things that happened in ancient times, giving them a mystical quality, a fiction used to convey ideas and persuade opinion. Via this dialogue, Plato proceeds to explain the citizenry as having sprung from the earth with metals embedded within their souls that preordain their station in life.^{xxvi} Those born with gold in their souls are rulers, silver are soldiers and bronze and iron were for the lower class of laborers.^{xxvii} This form of lie is justified, explains Socrates, because it is “useful to human beings as a form of remedy” and acceptable when used by leaders in order to create greater social cohesion and justify existing social stratifications.^{xxviii} A similar construct based on the divine right of kings to rule, society governed by fealty and homage paid to those in power, created the pyramidal nature of feudal society. Though feudal society’s hierarchical structure varied in the ways in which land was owned, controlled and managed, the system mostly consisted of landholdings or fiefs retained by the aristocracy that they granted to lesser subjects in return for their loyalty and service. This formed the societal pyramid power structure with everyone knowing their rank and place.^{xxix}

Thus, these societal myths or lies are about power and the justification for current hegemonic order and the recognition that in complex society coercion will not suffice to exercise control, but must be accompanied by an ideological and institutional discourse that manufactures consent and acceptance of the status quo. Continuing the process, the Protestant Reformation did not eliminate the Catholic Church’s feudal order, it simply substituted the old form of control for another.^{xxx} The Reformation doctrine, specifically that of Calvinism, espoused the concept of the “calling,” which stated that a person’s greatest virtue came from fulfilling one’s duty in worldly affairs.^{xxxi} However, it was in the doctrine of predestination that we find the precursor to the capitalist spirit, argues Max Weber.^{xxxii} The idea that some human beings were chosen by God to be saved from damnation and have a better life created a natural order and justification of social stratification. Hence, benefiting from the fertile

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ideological ground of the Reformation, Western political economic thinking at the start of the industrial revolution constructed its own “noble lie,” which is firmly grounded within conventional capitalist logic designed to manufacture consent and acceptance of the status quo.

In the modern capitalist doctrinal myth, we are to believe society is best served by individuals pursuing their own interest, for in doing so, they will more effectually promote the interests of society at large. Moreover, the ideological and institutional apparatus teaches that the successful individuals are superior and those that are poor must blame their own individual failure and not a fault of the system.^{xxxiii} In addition, this modern myth also promotes the idea that only a system of individuals free to produce via competitive free markets and a division of labor, under secure private property ownership, allowing for capital accumulation, represents the natural economic formation of democratic systems. Therefore, and crucially important, there are no alternatives to such a system and any endeavor that focuses on the common good or collective action as an organizing principle for society is undemocratic, unnatural and foolishly utopian and will not work.

Today, it is this “noble lie” which progressive scholars, social activists, and ordinary citizens need to confront, directly and concretely, with viable productive alternatives if we are to address the ecological disaster of climate change, eliminate the global inequalities, poverty, and economic instability, all of which the modern capitalist system has wrought upon the globe. In addition, the efforts to construct a truly inclusive, participatory, free, stable, secure democratic society that fosters political freedom and economic opportunity for all must be accelerated. Currently, the system’s obsession with the privatization of all assets, unfettered free trade and market fetishism, has led to unprecedented inequality where the top 1% own half of the world’s assets, the richest 10% of adults account for 88% of the wealth leaving the lower half of the global population owning less than 1% of global wealth.^{xxxiv} Consequently, this has helped to push the system into a growing state of anomie, evident by the economic collapse of Greece, increasing discontent with the system signaled by such events as Brexit, the presidential election victory of Donald Trump, and the rise of the Occupy Movement in the US and anti-austerity movements across Europe. This has led to the birth of new left wing parties and movements such as Podemos in Spain^{xxxv}, Sanders’ wing of the US Democratic Party, Momentum in the British Labour Party and Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI). Other groups have arisen which, while reflecting discontent, which are harder to place, such as Italy’s Five Star Movement^{xxxvi}, or the Pirate Parties^{xxxvii} which have sprung up in various parts of Northern Europe. All of this is coupled with an ongoing global economic malaise and widespread social unrest in both developed and developing countries.

However, supporters of the system, both left and right of the ideological spectrum, continue to promote the need to continue the same policies in order to promote economic growth. More economic growth, they argue, will provide more jobs, create wealth, reduce poverty and inequalities, and this in turn will promote and foster democratic outcomes and institutions.^{xxxviii} Nevertheless, this assumption of a natural nexus between free market capitalism and democracy is erroneous. Owen M. Fiss, Sterling Professor Emeritus of Law, of Yale University, in his paper *Capitalism and Democracy* (1992), pulling from the large body of literature critiquing capitalism and its democratic deficiencies, listed several democratic principles, “which are either divergent from, or entirely inconsistent with, many of the fundamental tenets of capitalism.”^{xxxix} These principles include popular sovereignty, economic independence, enlightened choice, citizen contentment and active participation. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to elaborate on all five principles. However, elaborating on just two principles -

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popular sovereignty and active participation - will suffice to illustrate the incompatibility with capitalism.

Popular sovereignty refers to “popular control over government”, i.e. a government which acts strictly at the directive of the citizenry.^{xl} At issue is that capitalism forces the relinquishing of economic control and decision-making to the private sector, where inequalities of economic power, which translate into political power, severely conflict with “the democratic ideal of one person one vote.”^{xli} Regarding active participation, a democratic system adopts active participation of the citizenry in governance as a core value. However, “capitalism involves a hierarchical system of management in the economic sphere which is inimical to such involvement.”^{xlii} These two aspects sit at the core of the issue of compatibility of capitalism and democracy and seriously question the popular concept that free market capitalism naturally leads to democracy. Because, as Rousseau argued in *The Social Contract*, true active participation “does not require absolute equality...but rather that the differences that do exist should not lead to political inequality where you have citizens rich enough to buy others and others so poor they are forced to sell themselves.”^{xliii}

These inequalities and social concerns are not unfortunate outcomes of a poorly managed system. They are inevitable outcomes of a system based solely on the extraction of profit via the exploitation of workers for the surplus value created by their labor. These undemocratic outcomes, inherent to the system, cannot be removed or eliminated; they can only be mitigated, because the need to profit and compete in the market compels the owners of capital to maximize the exploitation. More importantly, the exploitation is institutionalized in the various political, economic and cultural societal structures to compel workers to produce strictly for profit, and to commodify the whole of society in pursuit of this goal. This has led to assault on traditional democratic institutions, processes and norms worldwide during times of economic crises in the system. This neoliberal capitalist system, as the antithesis to equality, promotes the removal of popular democracy at the state level, championing the virtues of the private sector in the form of private wealth and corporate power.^{xliv} This of course provides a greater space of influence for those in the private sector possessing superior economic means to affect public policy decisions. This has created a system that is controlled by, and works for the benefit of, the richest and most powerful who are unaccountable to the general public and have to a large degree silenced the collective voice of the people in the formation of public policy across the globe. This fact has been empirically demonstrated, within the United States, by Martin Gilens, Professor of Politics at Princeton University and Benjamin I. Page, Fulcher Professor of Decision Making at Northwestern University, in their report, *Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens* 2014. Gilens and Page used multivariate analysis to determine which set of actors - elites, average citizens or organized interest groups - exercise the greater level of influence over public policy? Gathering and measuring data from a diverse set of 1,779 policy cases from 1981 to 2002, they concluded that “both individual economic elites and organized interest groups (including corporations, largely owned and controlled by wealthy elites) play a substantial part in affecting public policy, but the general public has little or no independent influence.”^{xlv}

Given the hegemonic control of private wealth and corporate power over public policy, how are progressives to directly and concretely confront this system and what are the alternatives to effect long term systemic change? To properly confront a hegemonic system, we need to understand what hegemony is and how it is constructed. The traditional definition of the concept stems from a realist perspective, which promotes the notion of the ‘balance of power’ manifesting as perpetual struggle for power and influence among nations. However, this narrow definition centered on power or more

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precisely coercion does not consider the cultural, social, political, ideological and institutional nature of achieving hegemonic rule. It is here that we need to turn to the ideas of Antonio Gramsci^{xlvi} in the Prison Notebooks (written in captivity between 1929 and 1935), in which he focused his analysis on the interactions of the various social groups or forces within the ensemble of a society. This concept, of interacting social forces (i.e. social class), is crucial to understanding Gramsci's view of the society, which is a dynamic edifice of not only political institutions but the various cultural and religious, educational, media etc. structures where these forces associate with each other, defining civil society, which in turn forms part of Gramsci's concept of the integral state^{xlvii}.

Within Gramsci's concept of the integral state, civil society becomes the terrain on which various social forces compete against each other for cultural and political leadership, and where a particular social force gains monopoly control over the coercive institutions of the political society.^{xlviii} It is within the process of competing social forces that Gramsci argues we are to understand the formation of hegemony. He illustrates three key stages a particular social force must achieve in order to gain hegemonic status. "Economic-corporate" is considered elementary because it is strictly at the level of economic interest, therefore the members of a professional group such as tradespeople or manufacturers are conscious of their homogeneity and the need to organize for their collective interests, but not yet for a true social group. Second is the formation of a class consciousness with solidarity of interests, but only "in terms of winning politico-juridical equality with the ruling groups" in order to participate in and effect reforms within the existing hegemonic structure. Third is the realization that one's "own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups."^{xlix} Thus, hegemony is achieved by a social class via a process of consent and coercion, which involves the domination of antagonistic groups who are either eliminated and/or subjugated by force if necessary while leading like-minded groups in a class alliance even before winning governmental power. Once the newly-hegemonic class is in power, hegemony is defined by its moral, political and cultural leadership over both allied groups and suppressed groups in perpetual coercion/consent dialectic.

For progressives confronting the dominant social class with the long-term view of societal transformation, at this early juncture, it is the "economic-corporate" stage on which they must concentrate to demonstrate that viable alternatives exist. It is crucial to understand that even though it is the middle, working classes and the poor that have suffered the most under free market capitalism, this does not portend that they will necessarily welcome the demise of the system. To the contrary, it is the great triumph of the current system that many of those it hurts the most have internalized its ideology as their own and made it their everyday common sense to the point where they are deeply dependent on its institutions. The axiom that "free markets are representative of democracy" is widely accepted as fact, by affluent, middle and lower class groups, in both developed and developing countries. Yet, it is these very groups that a revolutionary process must target. Again, this is despite the fact that the idea that democracy is the natural emergent form of governance under a free market system has been discredited theoretically and empirically.

This is easily illustrated by looking at the other forms of governance under which free market capitalism has flourished. Two countries which provide examples of this are, first, Chile under the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, 1973-1990 that wholeheartedly adopted the neoliberal economic policies of the famed economists of the Chicago School of Economics, an ideological center of free market capitalism. At no time during Pinochet's rule did the free market policies foster any form of governance remotely resembling a democratic process. Second, China is

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today officially, as declared by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the world largest and fastest growing capitalist economy, surpassing the US.ⁱ In today's globalized system, the country is considered an economic powerhouse, yet it continues to be a one-party state under the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Freedom House, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that conducts research and ranks countries according to their level of democratic process, political freedom and human rights, gave China rankings of 6.5 on its freedom scale, 6 on civil liberties and 7 on political rights.ⁱⁱ The worst possible ranking a country can receive in each category is 7, making China one of the least democratic states in the world, despite its capitalist free market prowess.

A fundamental understanding of the integrated nature of the current global hegemonic system and its mechanisms of influence in society and on formation of public policy is elemental to any transformative agenda; specifically, to understand the likelihood of successfully introducing concrete viable alternatives within the system. It is due to this complexity that any revolutionary project needs also to incorporate Gramsci's concepts of passive revolution and war of position.

These two concepts form the base from which Gramsci starts in formulating a strategy of overcoming an existing hegemony while simultaneously building a new one. Gramsci adopted the concept of passive revolution from Vincenzo Cuoco's historical account of the Neapolitan revolution of 1799, which had taken place without a radical-popular moment such as had happened in the French Revolution.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, passive revolution can be understood as progress that results from the rather sporadic and disjointed rebellious pushback of the general population against the dominant class leading to either acquiring and/or restoring popular economic and social demands, which may also lead to some level of a revolutionary moment.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, the goal of the revolutionary is to continuously introduce new aspects into social relations which trigger this dialectic process of revolution/restoration with the aim that each aspect will progressively lead the system closer to revolution, in effect conducting a war of position. Robert Cox, considered the founder of neo-Gramscian theory, expresses a war of position as a strategy that "slowly builds up the strength of the social foundations of a new state...creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society and building bridges between workers and other subordinate classes."^{liv}

Therefore, focusing on the "economic-corporate" stage is key. At this early stage of any transformative process, what is necessary is demonstrating to the general public that other systems exist and introducing them at every possible opportunity. Elinor Ostrom, winner of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2009, whose research focused on various forms of community management of "common pool resources," empirically demonstrated that various complex cooperative institutional forms of production and resource management exist and have been operating successfully for years subsumed and embedded within the current free market system. These alternatives exist and must be promoted and applied wherever and whenever possible^{lv}. Identifying key points of power in the system to gain influence and propagate ideas is crucial to any revolutionary project of building those bridges between concerned groups referred to in Cox's definition of a war of position.

The cooperative movement has become influential, among scholars and activists searching for a substitute to the capitalist corporate structure, by "providing a more democratic alternative to increasingly hierarchical free market capitalism."^{lvi} The very structure of cooperatives helps to foster Owens's democratic principles discussed earlier and their long history and growing recognition and

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influence validate Ostrom’s findings. Consumer-coops are owned by consumers who pool their resources together to buy goods or services required, providing economic independence and enlightened choice for those who may not have the means to do so individually. Producer-coops are generally formed by small product manufacturers who join forces to gain economies of scale to better compete in processing and marketing their products. Purchasing-coops are often small to midsize businesses in agricultural, retail industries or municipalities which are also seeking economies of scale to get better pricing from suppliers. Lastly, worker-coops owned and operated directly by the employees are seen as having the most potential in fostering democratic practices and equity, especially if they are linked and are interdependent on local community governance and cultural institutions.

For example, the Evergreen worker cooperatives which began in 2009 in Glenville, a poor minority neighborhood in Cleveland Ohio, in collaboration with the Democracy Collaborative^{lvii} have been working with this larger community governance in mind. The project was started as a local worker-owned environmentally sustainable industrial laundry to revitalize employment for the economically devastated area.^{lviii} The Evergreen group also owns and operates Ohio Cooperative Solar, a solar-panel installation firm, and Green City Growers, a state-of-the art greenhouse-based market garden cultivating and selling fresh produce. In addition, there is the rise of the Peer-to-Peer (P2P) economy that is trying to change our approach to a market economy as part of the growing collaborative practices observed across countries and communities. P2P^{lix} is a vision of a decentralized economic model where individuals circumvent the traditional corporate or business structure in order to trade directly.

Though these numerous initiatives help to discredit the modern “noble lie” of no alternatives, in and of themselves they do not represent a counter-hegemonic project. For the most part they are standalone or regionally isolated and too fragmented to represent a powerful cohesive challenge to the capitalist system. They are to be seen for what they are, a beginning step to the process of emancipation from neoliberal capitalism allowing a community to bypass the hegemonic constraints to some degree. ‘Bypassing’ refers to the ability of a community or group in question to create a level of emancipation from the hegemony allowing for local ownership of productive means, authority to change local policies and/or behaviors, and create more access to needed resources, skills and opportunity to effect self-directed community development. These initiatives are operating within the hegemonic system and are continuously confronted by more powerful structural influences and are subject to being co-opted. It is why the time-honored responses in the form of continuing and expanding the traditional labor rights, civil rights, feminist rights and LGBTQ rights movements are imperative. They help to counter the more immediate negative outcomes of this system, as well as expanding and deepening the public discourse of transitioning out of this system. They help provide a more open, fertile and responsive platform within society to scale up the introduction and implementation of these various long term alternatives.

It is understood that not all these alternative approaches will succeed. Nevertheless, as we have seen, ideas are powerful in and of themselves. Ideas can capture the imagination of whole societies in their search for meaning and the rationalization of daily life. Thus, it is not the overall success of the individual projects that matters. What matters is the dissemination of ideas that can foster a better vision of society absent of lies or any coercive mechanism, leaving a free and open space for social experimentation, transformation and progress. These ideas and social experimentations can serve as

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general strategic direction to constructing concrete and meaningful alternatives to the hierarchical power network of the current system.

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- ^{viii} Andreas Malm *Fossil Capital: The rise of steam power and the roots of global warming*, (Verso, 2016), cf. esp. p.131 ff.
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- ^{xxxvii} <http://pirate-parties.net/>
- ^{xxxviii} See, eg Department for International Development (UK) *Growth: Building jobs and prosperity in developing countries* <http://www.oecd.org/derec/unitedkingdom/40700982.pdf>
- ^{xxxix} Owens Fiss 1992
- ^{xl} Ibid
- ^{xli} Ibid
- ^{xlii} Ibid
- ^{xliii} Pateman 1970
- ^{xliv} Neoliberalism, represents the current ideological rationale for capitalism. It is concerned with limiting the political powers of the state and promoting the ideals of the free market economic system. It divides society into the public space of politics and government vs. the private space consisting of the economy and everyday individual and family life, in which the state should not interfere. This separation of the private and public has become encapsulated in the right of the individual to freely exist and produce for his/her wellbeing unhampered by the collective will of the state, thus government should issue as few regulatory restrictions as possible.
- ^{xlv} Gilens and Page 2014: 572
- ^{xlvi} Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was a founding member and a former leader of the Italian Communist Party. As a Marxist theorist, he was concerned with the concept of hegemony and the challenge of understanding the nature of capitalist societies and the possibility of building an alternative system. The development of the concept of hegemony by many modern scholars has centered on the writings of Gramsci, specifically his ideas expressed in “The Prison Notebooks”, written while in prison in fascist Italy between 1929 and 1935. His ideas contrast with the traditional Realist definition of hegemony, which focuses on the dominance or undue influence of one state over its weaker neighbor. Gramsci’s ideas incorporated three dimensions: The Intellectual, Moral, and Political aspects that together create a dominant structure within a society acting as a historic bloc in the face of counter-structures challenging its legitimacy.
- ^{xlvii} “According to this concept, the state (in its integral form) was not to be limited to the machinery of government and legal institutions (the ‘state’ understood in a limited sense). Rather, the concept of the integral state was intended as a dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society.” (Thomas 2009: 137)
- ^{xlviii} Thomas 2009: 137
- ^{xliv} Gramsci 1971: 181
- ⁱ Bird 2014
- ⁱⁱ Freedom House 2014
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- ^{liii} Morton 2012
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- ^{lv} See, eg, Richard Swift (2014) *SOS Alternatives to Capitalism*, New Internationalist Books
- ^{lvi} Williams 2007: 3
- ^{lvii} Founded in 2000 by Gar Alperovitz and Ted Howard at the University of Maryland as a research center, The Democracy Collaborative, focuses on developing ideas and strategies to tackle issues of economic inequality, specifically focusing on counter-hegemonic approaches. For more see: <http://democracycollaborative.org/>

^{lviii} Alperovitz, Howard & Williamson 2010

^{lix} For more on the P2P economy see the work Michel Bauwens, Nicolas Mendoza and Franco Iacomella in *A Synthetic Overview of the Collaborative Economy*.

The authors would like to thank Marjorie McGiffen-Tonge for her valuable editorial input.

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