

THE NECESSARY GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE

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WHEN we think of the *necessary global alternative*, the starting point cannot be other than the acknowledgement of the existing constraints, so as to be able to counterpose to the sceptical – and frequently even cynical – advocacy of “there is no alternative” a view very different from the tendentious misrepresentation of the unfolding trends of development as insurmountably capitalist “globalization”.

The proper assessment of the global dimension of the capital system was always an integral part of the Marxian theory. In fact Marx was the first, far ahead of everybody else, to insist on the inescapability of the system’s globally poised determinations and the ensuing *perverse universality* which must be overcome in due course by a positively defined global order. In the same Marxian spirit it was firmly stressed in *The Power of Ideology* that “it would be quite wrong to follow the sceptical or pessimistic advice of those who want to persuade us to abandon these concerns. For the destructive universality of capital cannot be countered by a withdrawal into the ‘little world’ of local skirmishes. Like it or not, there is no getting away from the historical predicament in terms of which only *global solutions* are conceivable to get to grips with our *global problems*. The socialist conception was envisaged right from the beginning as an alternative to the antagonistic universality of the capital system. [...] In the end the great historical issue of our epoch is bound to be decided precisely in terms of the universal – i.e. *globally* defined – viability (or failure) of these two systems of control in an inescapably intertwined world tending toward its full integration. For there are too many problems – some absolutely vital for securing the elementary conditions of human survival on this planet – to which other than *literally global solutions* are quite unthinkable.”¹

Humanity’s move from capital’s antagonistically fragmented national states to a positively sustainable global order is an absolute necessity, in the sense that human survival remains permanently threatened without achieving the required transition to such an order. When the great Cuban patriot José Martí stressed that “*patria es humanidad*” (our homeland is humanity), he was pointing in the same direction. What is clearly implied in the advocacy of a positively defined global order – one that can be considered a real homeland by all human beings –, is that it is impossible to accomplish the historic task on our horizon without superseding the open and latent antagonisms of the existing order.

The pivotal question of this historic task concerns the necessity to overcome the *hierarchical adversariality* of capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction. The radical restructuring unavoidable in this respect is tantamount to elaborating a qualitatively different form of social metabolic control. The nature of the new form can be summed up, quoting Marx’s words, as a system based on “*a general plan of freely combined individuals*”.² This means in simplest terms the replacement of labour’s chains imposed by capital with the *co-*

¹ First edition of *The Power of Ideology*, Harvester/Wheatsheaf, London, and New York University Press, New York, 1989, p. 464.

² MECW, vol. 5., p. 83.

operative ties of the individuals and the various groups to which the individuals belong. Through this qualitative change they are enabled to establish a far superior and potentially much more productive form of *overall coordination* than what is feasible on the basis of the authoritarian external control of labour in capital's chain-gang system. In other words, the social metabolic control of freely combined individuals – instituted and constantly developed by the freely combined individuals themselves – makes possible the sustainability of a new productive order. For *sustainability equals the conscious control of the social metabolic process of reproduction by the freely associated producers* (which is, of course, the only feasible form of *self-control*), in contrast to the untenable, structurally entrenched, adversariality and ultimate destructiveness of capital's reproductive order.

The regulating principles of a sustainable socialist mode of social metabolic reproduction are incomparably more precise and firmly grounded than the wishful postulates of a fully globalized capitalist system under its harmoniously functioning "global government". For, as far as the latter is concerned, not only there is no sign whatsoever of it today but, much worse than that, the identifiable signs of development point in the opposite direction.

The regulating principles of an advanced socialist society are not confined to the unavoidable task of *negating* the worst contradictions of the existing order. They address with equal determination the *positive* requirements of securing the *long-term viability* – indeed the totally *open-ended and indefinite*, because constantly renewed, time-horizon – of society's conscious reproductive practices, in a *qualitatively* different way to the irrational narrowness of *capital's time-consciousness*. For capital, under the pressure of its incorrigible systemic contradictions, cannot look ahead by more than a few years, and even that only in the form of chaotically interacting and often mutually cancelling fragments. This is well illustrated by the short-term margin of action of even the giant transnational corporations on the world market, exposing the vacuity of their claimed conscious strategies of control, not to mention the incomparably more constrained behaviour of the great multiplicity of much more limited business enterprises, internally as well as internationally.

The question of time among the socialist regulating principles appears in two principal respects. First, as regards the meaningfully usable life-time of the individuals, it makes necessary a radical departure from the prevailing conception of "free time" as something utterly devoid of sense. Capital must exploit the time of the individuals for its own – one and only feasible – purpose of securing *capital-accumulation*. Anything beyond that must be degraded to the level of *useless time* or, in other words, *idle "leisure"*. This is because the necessary alternative use of the individuals' lifetime is inconceivable without a social framework in which the growth of free time with unimpeded generosity is both actively/consciously encouraged, and finds positive outlets for its employment. Otherwise the danger arises of producing *social dynamite* in the form of frustrated "free time" denied of any meaningful outlets, as we find manifesting itself in a multiplicity of ways in our existing societies, from mindless vandalism to the painful consequences of a widespread drug culture. One can easily imagine how much greater the explosive danger of senseless idleness would become in capitalistically advanced societies if productive development could be allowed to release the maximum amount of free time potentially available over above the *necessary labour time* now readily exploitable by capital. It would gravely intensify *chronic unemployment* and the social disruption inseparable from it.

The second respect in which the inescapable burden of time is clearly visible concerns society's reproductive activity in general, not only at a particular point in time but also in its *longest term time-horizon*. This is the true meaning of *planning* worthy of its name. It is clearly shown by a quotation taken from a most illuminating interview with Harry Magdoff, published in *Monthly Review* in October 2002. The interview reports a conversation Magdoff had with Che Guevara:

“I said to Che, ‘What’s important is that when plans are made, that the planners, the ones who come up with the directions and the numbers, should be involved in thinking about the actual policy alternatives in light of practical conditions.’

Whereupon he laughed and he said that when he was in Moscow, his host Khroushev, who was then the head of the Party and the government, took him around to see places as a political tourist. Traveling through the city, Che told Khroushev that he would like to meet with the planning commission. Whereupon Khroushev said: ‘*Why do you want to do that? They are just a bunch of accountants.*’³

Those who dismiss the very idea of planning, on the ground of the Soviet implosion, could not be more wrong. For the sustainability of a global order of social metabolic reproduction is inconceivable without a proper system of planning, managed on the basis of *substantive democracy* by the freely associated producers. The failure of Soviet type planning – adopted all over Eastern Europe –, and therewith the doom of the Soviet type system was determined by the imposition *from above*, by a *separate* body of decision making, the increasingly problematical orders to which even the “*bunch of accountants*” had to respond unquestioningly, whereas the producers themselves were never even consulted, except through the periodic ritual of “enthusiastic approval”. Decisions were authoritarian also in the sense that the projections were not allowed to be reexamined and changed once the plan was legally codified, often with very painful consequences for the people involved.⁴ The time employed in this kind of planning process was *decapitated*: it had no *real future*; only the arbitrary projection of the present into a *wishful* and *voluntaristically imposed “future”*. Such a wishfully postulated future could not be turned into reality precisely because of the political voluntarism which dominated society (this is what is characterised by Magdoff, in the passage quoted in note 47, as “a political system resembling a war economy”).

In reality the planning imposed in this way could only be *post festum* – i.e. haphazard and clumsily reactive backward at the next stage of the planning process, because of the unavoidable frustration of the voluntaristic projections. For the same reasons, it could never be truly *comprehensive*, nor could it aspire at becoming *long-term*. Both characteristics are essential to a viable planning process, but realizable only if actively supported by the freely associated producers. Unstable *partiality*, instead of lasting *comprehensiveness* (despite the general projections of the politically commanded and overruled “*bunch of accountants*”), and the negatively reactive *post festum* determination of the adopted objectives, in place of the long-term *realizable future* of the decisions reached – on the basis of substantive equality and democracy – by the producers themselves, instead of being imposed upon them *from above* by a *separate body*. These are the salient features contrasting the failed Soviet type practice with the acutely needed planning system of the future. And when we examine more closely the planning practices of even the biggest quasi-monopolistic corporations of capitalist soci-

³ Harry Magdoff, interviewed by Huck Gutman, “Creating a Just Society: Lessons from Planning in the U.S.S.R. & the U.S.”, *Monthly Review*, October 2002, p. 2. And Magdoff adds a couple of pages further on: “Let me emphasize the way the plan was developed and the politics that came with it. I think that the separation between the planners, technicians and economists, and the powerful political bureau of the Party, was an important element in the difficulties that developed. First of all, nonspecialists were making the economic decisions, basing them on political decisions about what was best from the standpoint of show, though of course behind it was the feeling that it was the best for the people. But at the same time a political system resembling a war economy was already being established.”

⁴ For a critique of some shocking decisions and their incorrigible consequences, see my book *Satire and Reality*, completed in 1954 and published (in Hungarian, by Sz. K. K.) in Budapest, in January 1955. The relevant passages on the criticized planning process are reported in my study: “La teoría económica y la política: más allá del capital”, in *Revista BCV Foros*, no. 7, 2002, p. 315.

ety, idealized and championed by people like John Kenneth Galbraith,⁵ it transpires that an astronomical distance separates them from the kind of planning that is both possible and necessary for a sustainable future order.

The system of planning here described certainly cannot be left to “just a bunch of accountants”, nor indeed to a separate body of politicians commanding the producers by dictates from above. For the genuine and viable planning process of a new mode of social metabolic reproduction distinguishes itself from the known forms of partial and superimposed planning through being firmly oriented by a *qualitatively* different *socialist accountancy*, in contrast to the fetishistic *quantifying narrowness* of the past varieties.

This is what brings the two principal dimensions of time – the life-time of the particular individuals and the broadest temporal determinations of their society – together. For *socialist accountancy* is unthinkable without a planning process in which the adopted objectives, based on the *needs of the individuals* – in their great variety and dynamic potential for fully activating the people involved for the realization of their own needs – properly *coalesce* into a viable mode of collective action. This is what gives meaning to the “general plan of the freely combined individuals”.

The issue itself is an eminently *qualitative* one, because both the individuals’ *needs* (which are qualitatively different by their very nature) and the conditions of their realization require continuous (truly non-adversarial, hence *mutually* modifiable) interchanges among the co-operatively associated individuals within a fully adaptable social framework. The results of these interchanges can be flexibly modified in the light of the rationally reexamined outcome of the freely adopted policies, in contrast to the structurally predetermined “one-way traffic” of all conceivable systems ruled from above. This is what makes possible also the adoption of a qualitatively different approach to the question of *economy and waste*, once it becomes possible to overcome the structurally superimposed aprioristic determination of what the individuals are supposed to accept as “their needs”, so decreed because they are profitably produced by a fetishistic system.

In the now dominant mode of social metabolic reproduction the meaning of a successful “*economy*” is perversely defined by the system’s ability to multiply *waste*. The cancerous cultivation of “consumerism” – set against the callous denial of even the most elementary needs of the overwhelming majority of humankind – is the necessary consequence of the underlying social/economic determinations. And the perverse violation of the concept of economy does not end there. It is made worse by the way in which “*abundance*”, too, is defined. For in this framework of economic management the concept of “abundance” constitutes a vicious circle with *unlimited and unlimitable waste*. It cannot be stressed enough, capital’s self-expansionary imperative is totally incompatible with the concept of economy as *economizing*. Accordingly, our society is declared to be “advanced” (which really means nothing more than *capitalistically advanced*) on the basis of its capacity to produce and sustain waste, in the service of continued capital-expansion at whatever cost. The more abundantly society can produce waste, and live with it, the more advanced it is supposed to be. This determination poisons also another vitally important relationship: that between *scarcity and abundance*.

Evidently, no society is sustainable in the longer run, in a world of finite resources, without fully addressing the difficulties involved. However, what we find in our “advanced” societies is that they *add insult to injury*. First, they multiply waste, inflicting thereby great

⁵ John Kenneth Galbraith idealized the corporatist planning process to such an extent, closing at the same time not one eye but both to the deficiencies of Soviet type planning, that he confidently predicted the coming *convergence* of the two systems, instead of the restoration of capitalism in the U.S.S.R. For a critical analysis of his theories, see Chapter 2.3 of *The Power of Ideology*: “The fallacy of technological solutions to social problems”, pp. 65-76 and 483-486.

injury not only on the present but also on the future, and then they add the insult as well by pretending that they have solved the problem of *scarcity* by “*abundance*”. Astonishingly, however, this “solution” is based on the ground that they can produce waste “in great abundance”, and get away with it; which is supposed to provide both the proof of overcoming scarcity and its peculiar justification. To be sure, a world in which people are condemned to have a “from hand to mouth” existence, could not have anything to do with this kind of relationship between scarcity and wasteful abundance. In reality, of course, scarcity is made worse through the reproductive practices of our “advanced societies”, instead of being eliminated, as often claimed.⁶ For, in order to make an inroad into the millennial reign of scarcity, it would be necessary to remove the conditions which continue to *reproduce* it, on an *ever-enlarged scale*, due to the antagonistic inner determinations of our social reproductive order. Only a *quality-oriented socialist accountancy* could show a way out of this quagmire of contradictions.

Naturally, in this respect, as well as in all of the others mentioned so far, the role of education is crucial. For without a different conception of education – meaning: the co-operatively managed *self-education* of the freely associated producers, oriented toward, and inspired by, the production and satisfaction of their *genuine needs* – there can be no way out of the vicious circle of producing scarcity on an ever-enlarged scale. In the absence of the co-operative self-education of equals capable of understanding the real meaning of *economy*, everything would remain at the mercy of the interests vested in the maximal reproduction of *artificial needs*, in their inseparability from the profitable perpetuation of scarcity.

This conception of education is radically different not only from the narrow instrumentality and fetishistic determinations of the dominant educational practices, managed in subordination to the needs of capital-expansion (which, as we know, must be *internalized* by the individuals as “their own needs”). It qualitatively differs also from the well-meaning but unreal educational counter-image to the existent produced by the *utopian socialists*. The unavoidable dividing line from the latter concerns the reproduction of *substantive inequality* in its vision, inherited from the utopistically negated order. This is why Marx criticized the utopian “division of society into two parts, one of which [the educators] is superior to society”: a view forgetful of the fact that “*the educator must himself be educated*”.⁷

The new conception of education is not confined to a limited number of years in the life of the individuals but, due to its radically changed functions, embraces all of them. The “self-education of equals” and the “self-management of the social reproductive order” cannot be separated from one another. The self-management – by the associated individuals – of the vital functions of the social metabolic process is an *ongoing* – and inevitably *changing* – enterprise. The same goes for the educational practices which enable the individuals to fulfil those functions as constantly redefined by themselves, in accord with the changing requirements of which they are the active agents. Education, in this sense, is truly “*continuing education*”. It can be neither “vocational” (which means in our societies the confinement of the people involved to narrowly predetermined utilitarian functions, deprived of any power of decision making), nor “general” (which is supposed to teach the individuals, in a patronizing way, the “skills of thinking”). These notions are the arrogant presumptions of a conception rightly castigated by Gramsci when he wrote that “There is no human activity from which all intellectual intervention can be excluded – *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*.”⁸ Yet, our dominant educational practices are based precisely on such, in the longer run totally untenable, separation. By contrast, “continuing education”, as a necessary constituent of the socialist regulating principles, is inseparable from the meaningful practice of

⁶ See Chapter 2.2 of *The Power of Ideology*, “The premature theorization of the end of scarcity”.

⁷ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, MECW, vol. 5., p. 4.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “The formation of intellectuals”, in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1957, p. 121.

self-management. It is an integral part of the latter both as representing at first the *formative phase* in the life of the self-managing individuals, and, on the other hand, in the sense of enabling a *positive feedback* from the educationally enriched individuals, with their appropriately changing and equitably redefined needs, to the overall determination of society's orienting principles and objectives.

This is how a new type of *co-ordination* of the social reproductive process becomes feasible. It is based on and sustained by the principle of equitable *horizontality*, instead of the existing forms of *hierarchical structural domination*, justified by capital in the name of "orderly production and distribution", as if there could be no alternative to it. What is true, of course, is that the overall regulating principles of societal reproduction (operative in its "macrocosm") cannot be significantly different from the inner regulators of the constitutive parts – the "microcosms" – themselves. Accordingly, the antagonistically structured microcosms of capital's social order cannot be *co-ordinated horizontally*. They must be *subsumed vertically* under a "top down" order of control, no matter how large the constitutive parts that must be subsumed in this way. Capital cannot control the social metabolic process in any other way. Similarly, the principle of *overall horizontal co-ordination* is compatible only with a type of "microcosm" which is in its innermost nature fully *equitable* – and in that sense also properly *self-managed* and therefore not burdened with *inner antagonisms*, in contrast to all varieties of "top-down control". The production of the self-managing individuals' real needs, in their inseparability from a radically different conception of education indicated above, is an absolutely necessary requirement of the successful adoption of *horizontal co-ordination* as the overall regulating principle of control in a sustainable future order.

The final point that must be mentioned in this brief summary of the regulating principles of a genuine socialist order concerns the question of *exchange*. Our societies are dominated by the insuperable contradictions of the *exchange of commodities*. The present system regulating this exchange is not only *based* on substantive inequality but also constantly *reinforces* that inequality as the productive powers of society increase, instead of diminishing it as ritualistically promised but never realized. All pious hope attached to the virtues of resolving this problem by "progressive taxation" came to nothing, reversing even the little change in postwar taxation for the worse in recent years. Not surprisingly, therefore, the notorious "gap between the rich and the poor" continues to increase, in line with the concentration and centralization of capital, absurdly enhancing *the rule of wealth over society*, when the only meaningful advancement should be measured in terms of the degree to which the *rule of society over wealth* – feasible only through a *qualitative* change – could be shown to be in the process of being instituted. The required change is conceivable only if a very different regulating principle is brought into play regarding exchange. This would involve a fundamental reorientation of the pursued social objectives from the *exchange of commodities* to the *exchange of activities* by the self-managing individuals, as advocated by Marx.⁹ Without the adoption and appropriate consolidation of this regulating principle, also the planning process is bound to be vitiated, bringing back through the back door an authoritarian command structure for determining the productive targets and regulating the distribution of the products.

Contrary to the accusations of our adversaries, there is absolutely nothing unrealizable about the regulating principles of a globally viable future social reproductive order as discussed in this article. What is really unrealizable, instead, are the projections and promises of the existing order, characterized by sharpening contradictions even today, not to mention their increasingly destructive prospects for the future. The expectations of utopian socialists were indeed unrealizable for a clearly identifiable reason. They assumed, as mentioned before, the continued substantive inequality of the social order, even as reformed by their pro-

⁹ This problem is fully discussed in Chapter 19 of *Beyond Capital*, "The Communal System and the Law of Value", pp. 739-770.

fessed enlightened concerns. And that was the principal defect of their conception. It had to nullify all of their expectations, however sincerely believed and noble in their intent.

It is most telling that those who deny the possibility of a viable socialist transformation base their “refutation” not simply on ignoring the crucial *difference*, as regards equality, between the advocated Marxian regulating principles and those of the utopian socialists, so as to subsume the former under the latter and to dismiss all of them as “hopelessly utopian”. Worse than that, by a sleight of hand they themselves arbitrarily assume that *inequality as such is absolutely insurmountable*, and then triumphantly deduce from that assumption that any alternative to it is necessarily unrealizable. All this seems to be right and proper, in accord with their “rational procedure”. In truth, however, their argument is based on the gross violation of logic, although it seems to “follow”, as they say, that the socialist regulating principles are unworkable and their objectives unrealizable. For what is claimed to “follow” does not follow from anything other than what has been fallaciously/circularly assumed by our adversaries right from the beginning.