

Future of Capitalism, Future of Our Movements

Political Economy & Social Movements - Winter 2007

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 - Questions, Comments, Conversations

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama from "The End of History?", 1989)

The expansion of capitalist imperatives throughout the world has regularly reproduced effects that it had at the beginning within its country of origin: dispossession, extinction of customary property rights, the imposition of market imperatives, and environmental destruction. (Wood, 194)

And burrowing under everything you think
you know
some of us move slow
like inch worms
softening the earth
to bury you
(Jordan, 64)

However fragmented they may be at the present time, the political and social struggles waged in both the South and the North against various aspects of the dominant system are sufficiently evident and numerous for us not to have to list them here. Evidently too they are growing in number and strength with everyday that passes...To build the convergence of all social and political movements that give expression to the victims of neoliberal capitalism certainly demands respect for their diversity. (Amin, *Obsolescent Capitalism*, 139-140)

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Political Economy & Social Movements: Future of Capitalism, Future of Our Movements

I don't often do this: give a full-on lecture as I am about to do. I like workshops for the most part. But today I wanted to try to give a longer talk. To try some thing a little different. I think there lectures are important at times. So let me kind of get through each section and I will make spaces for you to ask questions and respond throughout. Write down your questions as we go along and I will give some time to come back to them and have discussion. And we'll dialogue in that way. OK?

Some Big Questions: What is the future of capitalism? What is the future of our movements?

Wow, what heavy questions, right? What is the future of capitalism? It's pretty clear to me that it is obsolescent. Obsolescent means "In the process of (apparent) disappearance, atrophy or going out of date." To much of the world this is welcome news. But what does it really mean? What will replace this obsolescent economic and social system? Obsolescent as in becoming obsolete. Like in that Blue Scholars song Wounded Eyes:

"My wounded eyes seen through the lies; many brutalized; so we rise and fight for the future we strive. Wounded eyes seen through the lies many soon to die. Who am I? A student observing my environment to see contradictions in concrete conditions evidence we're living in an obsolete system."

You have to forgive me I have another Blue Scholars quote later on. I was listening to them as I was writing this and it just seemed to fit. It's from their album The Long March.

What comes after capitalism is directly related to the question: what is the future of our movements. So, what is the future of our movements? (We might also ask who is the we in this "h/our?")

Finally, given this obsolescence there is some work to be done to save ourselves from this mess. The old fork in the road Rosa Luxemburg

called "Socialism or Barbarism." Istvan Mezaros even goes on to say that if we go down the wrong path that it will be "barbarism if we are lucky. For the extermination of humanity is the ultimate concomitant of capital's destructive course of development" (80).

Here in this lecture I hope to give a few thoughts on both of the questions: What is the future of capitalism? And what is the future of our movements? In an effort to contribute to ongoing dialogues we are probably all part of by now.

The Role of the Individual in making in the future

An initial answer to both of these questions is the same or perhaps very similar.

That answer is: In many ways it depends on us, each one of us. We are agents of history. We make an impact. We make contributions. We add to the totality of change. See, for instance, Plekhanov's essay "The Role of the Individual in History." Its very philosophical, historical, and abstract but well worth reading and studying. There Plekhanov tries to carve out a space between on the one hand the theory that so-called "great men" make history and on the other the fatalistic theory that we are totally subject to the sweep of history. According to Plekhanov, individuals are not heroes that change everything on their own with some grand heroic action, but instead that individuals are produced by their times and can be part of changing the conditions that produced them but in order to make significant contributions to this change individuals must understand the times they are in and the role they can play in those times.

As this guy Karl Marx suggested we don't make these changes in a vacuum or in a time and place of our choosing. We act in a particular place and time and context. Our contributions and impacts are themselves impacted by how and where we make them. See, for instance, The 18th Brumaire where Marx considers the history of dictatorship in France and ideas about history. He writes there "Humans make their own history, but they do not make it as

they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language." We see some of this happening today. But let's learn from the past not repeat it.

As I talk about the future of capitalism, I want to avoid an apocalyptic vision. I don't think the politics of fear and scare tactics will help humanity, rather just the opposite. Fear helps enable the powerful, the ruling class to manipulate us do terrible and horrific things to each other. But I must say that ignorance is just as powerful in enabling destruction. So as I talk today I want to offer a sober, but realistic assessment of where we are at, where we are headed, and what role each individual plays in making social movements and economic change.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Future in the Present I

Though we don't have to look in the future to see what capitalism will bring. It is here with us today. We can look around the world and see what capitalism is capable of doing to human beings and the extent human being will go to achieve the aims of profit, accumulation and competition when they are embroiled in its logic and dependent as we all are to its relationships. So to be honest with you I think the future of capitalism is here and it will continue in this way (and perhaps get worse) unless human beings like yours selves united with other human beings in your communities and across the country and across the world unite in common vision and purpose to think through to the roots of the problem and for humanity's

sake create a cooperative society.

Changes: Quantitative and Qualitative

Things change. That's pretty clear to us, right?
Examples...

My body
My Relationship with my daughter
My Olympia
(elaborate on examples)

Well, one dude (actually one among many) thought that after the Soviet Union fell that we had made such a huge change with the so-called fall of communism that we had reached the end of change altogether, he called it the End of History. This guy Francis Fukuyama at one time down with the PNAC folks, proclaimed that we had reached the end of history first in an article and then in a whole book. I have a copy if you want to borrow it. He proclaimed we had arrived; we made it, heaven on earth, hallelujah: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." But of course while he was writing his pretty words the neoliberal onslaught was in full swing and human beings just like you were dying around the world of starvation, malnutrition, curable disease, unnatural disasters, and of course ongoing conflict competing over "scarce goods" in a world of abundance. Conditions were changing the rich were getting richer and the poor poorer, in an even more intense way.

But we know things change and I think so did professor Fukuyama—if he didn't he certainly knows it now. Things will always change. Even if humanity is able to reach a classless society that won't be the end of history either. New challenges will emerge and the world will go on changing. OK so things change, but the kinds of changes that occur and how and why they change aren't always so clear. That's why we study and analyze and theorize and try out our

assessment in the real world. We have been talking for a quarter and a half about changes in capitalism and this quarter we've specifically talked about changes in the last 30 years or so. We've been studying social change and the movements that hope to bring about social change. We've studied how capitalism has changed and we studied some of the reasons why. We're just scratching the surface, but we now are getting a handle on it and melding that with our own knowledge and experience and wisdom and hopefully getting more eager to learn more and get involved more and play a conscious role in the changes that are occurring. We do play a role regardless of whether we know it or not, but it probably better to play a conscious role.

As we do that we should consider two key kinds of change: Quantitative changes and qualitative changes. Quantitative change is a change in the amount of something. Like the rich are getting richer and the poor getting poorer. That is a quantitative change. Like the phrase "same shit just more of it." But when the shit itself changes, when something new is introduced, when there is a leap from one type of thing to a completely different type of thing with a new set of relations and logic this is a change in quality, or what you might call a leap.

One day you are playing checkers; each player has the same pieces and has a common understanding of the rules. Day by day, little by little the game changes. First the other player has a pawn instead of a checker, then later a knight, then later a rook. Sooner or later you are trying to play checkers with chess pieces while your opponent is playing chess and eating you alive. You have to get new pieces and to begin to play chess too.

Like the Blue Scholars say in that song Cornerstone, "Watch how the quantity leaps into quality deep beyond the reaches of your Babylon economy..."

I think these days we are living around the time of such a leap. And I think today there is something new going on. Something new has been introduced that changes the rules that

society was based on. We are seeing a qualitative change. I'll come back to what I think is a current leap in a little bit.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

But right now I want to glance back in time some to look at another qualitative change. In thinking about the future of capitalism and its end, I think it's important to consider its origins and the economic systems that preceded it. Before capitalism—yes there was a before capitalism, and that means it began at some point and is therefore finite and therefore will like all things finite come to an end. Of course the question then is what will replace it, that is very much up to us—but before I get to its end and what comes next let me get back to the fact that I was talking about before capitalism. Before capitalism there were various ways that human societies met their needs and distributed goods.

On 528 Bowles, Edwards and Roosevelt outline Karl Marx's conception of prior economic systems. I want to briefly mention these modes of production just so that we have on the table that capitalism is a discrete and specific system that did not always exist. Prior to it there were other forms that existed in different ways in different times and places that were conditioned by the environment and context in which the people lived.

Early communism
Slave mode of production
The Tributary system
Feudalism

Some think of these as stages that societies go through, but I think that's too narrow of a frame work to describe the great variety of human experiences and responses to their needs and environments.

To understand capitalism it's probably good to think about what made it different from the system that preceded it, where it first emerged. What was new about it? What are its

specific, distinguishing characteristics?

One of Pete's early lectures defined Capitalism as having the following key characteristics: Production for Profit; Means of Production in the hands of a minority; Wage labor; and generalized commodity production. These were not always part of human relations, not part of the distribution of goods and not how people got their needs met. They were totally new.

But keep in mind all that we have said about process and about dominant, residual and emergent. Capitalism didn't come down on a space ship and wipe everything out and then bam was here complete and whole with its push for profits, accumulation, exploitation and competition. The relationships that it "favored" emerged amidst other kinds of relationships and gradually replaced many of those other kinds of relationships.

Like in the checker game I mentioned before each new chess piece that was introduced added to the change from the quality "checkers" to the quality chess. There was a leap from checkers to chess. Just as there was a leap from feudalism to capitalism and from capitalism to some form of post capitalist society. The rules became different and the changes happened gradually and disbursed gradually and didn't happen the same all over. But some things fundamentally changed. Where once you worked a communal plot of land for food, your son or daughter had to work the same land for a wage, because it was taken over and fenced in.

Ellen Meiksins Wood in her book the Origin of Capitalism charts how these key characteristics emerged out of old relations to create new kind of relations. She situates these relations emerging in rural England and emphasizes that they were qualitatively different and had certain imperatives built into these relations. Imperatives are things one is commanded to do by the internally consistent rules and "logic" of a given system. The key imperatives to capitalism are profit and accumulation and they are governed by competition in the market and

enabled by exploitation of labor. The history, legacy and ongoing dynamics of conquest, imperialism, slavery, and racism have been in a major way about imposing this "logic" on the peoples of the world. Recall Vijay Prashad's understanding of how the ground of xenophobia became a systematized racism as capitalism was introduced to the Indian Ocean region from Europe via the mercantillist traders.

The new emerging market relations and their imperatives necessitated changes in everything: changes in law, changes in social relationships, changes in how people got their needs met. Most everything had to change and develop to match the new way of doing things that was based in new property relations. Wood concludes that "The expansion of capitalist imperatives throughout the world has regularly reproduced effects that it had at the beginning within its country of origin: dispossession, extinction of customary property rights, the imposition of market imperatives, and environmental destruction." These have impacted relations between classes and between countries. They have diffused around the world to bring more and more of the earth subject to its imperatives and have spiraled into bring more and more of life into the market.

Because capitalism had an origin it will have an end. Its finite. In the same way capitalism emerged out of feudalism, new ways of organizing economic and social life have been and are emerging. We see this in the upheavals going on around the world today.

Something New?

I mentioned before something new and I want to go back to that. But let me give a precedent. As the industrial revolution swept in and as new technologies emerged in agriculture, much of humanity was thrown into a great transition a leap. Checkers to Chess, right? People were no longer needed in the fields as mechanical harvesters replaced them and they were pushed off. This happened at different times in different places. But one example is the enormous movement of African Americans and poor white sharecroppers

from the US South as new cotton harvesters and other technological advances pushed people off the land. In the cities, first cities in the South itself and then also cities in the northern Midwest industrial towns, factory jobs were waiting and expanding. These black and white workers who had worked on the land were proletarianized, made into proletarians by these new technologies. And factories were there waiting for folks ready to take them in to make cars and steel and weapons. The whole process took decades and happened in fits and starts over a century.

Today, something similar is going on around the world. New technologies are being introduced in every sector of the global economy and much more quickly than before. Recall my lecture on automation. As productivity goes up fewer people are needed. Capitalism of course adapts to changes in quantity, but at some point this leaps into a new quality. Some of the adaptations so far have been around debt, financial speculation, and the phony props and balloons waiting to burst. Other adaptations involve changes in the form of the State and the way in which people are ruled.

The informal sector (people selling goods on the street, working as day laborers, prostitutes) is growing and becoming a dominant part of some economies. More and more people must move around the world to find a means of making a living and surviving. Meanwhile, in this country we see a growth in homelessness and more and more people relate to capitalist production in new ways: temporary employment, day labor, sub contracted sub contracts, sweat shops and even an increase in outright slavery. The reserve army of labor grows in quantity but as this growth occurs something new is going on that is making segments of the reserve permanent. Something is different. Human beings are becoming completely disposable. In his recent book Planet of Slums, Mike Davis chronicles the global phenomenon of people living in makeshift shelters at the edges of cities from Nairobi to Dhaka to Sao Paolo to Los Angeles. The Future history of the Third World's post-industrial megacities. A billion-

strong global proletariat ejected from the formal economy. We see this happening in our own country and community too. For lack of a better term we might call this part of the global population "a new class" entirely.

Within this context as well as the global struggles around energy resources and the global race to the bottom, countries around the world and segments of US society around the country are beginning to consider how they will move forward as these things change. Some nations and movements are positioning themselves to challenge the status quo and are facing various difficulties.

US is attempting to smash, steer or contain emerging alternatives. These are the struggles of the 21st century and they are taking many forms.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Future in the Present II

Movements around the world including in this country are emerging, growing and developing.

Difference between subjective and objective. Objective is how things are regardless of what we think of them. Subjective is how we think about how things are.

The new class I mentioned before is part of this global upheaval. Tent cities, shanty towns, migrant works. All these folks are beginning to make concrete and objective demands based on need not necessarily ideology. The strongest part of the anti-war movement in this country is the GI resistance and Military families. This is not an ideological movement. As Zoltan has said this is a movement by those who are impacted directly.

The subjective element has a role to play and the objective movement can become more conscious. These two joining forces with those who are immediately impacted developing leadership...

This set the basis for not an ideological communist movement but an objective communist movement in which people are demanding distribution based on need. Granted the movement as a whole may not be conscious of itself as a class and acting as a class but this basis of demand-

ing things based on need I think are the seeds of a movement that will build a new system.

And there are responses that are also occurring: drugs, prisons, militarized police forces, growing arms economy and global military. Cheapening of human life and the use of difference to dehumanize and kill. Those who benefit from the system and desire to hold on to it will fight to keep it and they will pay others to join their fight, they will continue to organize ideological bases that will fight for them, they will analyze and adjust, they will offer concessions, they will preemptively attack growing movements, they will attempt to divide movements. They will not give up easily. But even they who benefit so overwhelmingly from the way things are now, would gain in a transition to cooperative society. They would be safer. The earth would be cleaner. They would be able to become more human. They wouldn't have to be so stressed out by all the competition. Etc.

Some will perhaps even join the vast majority of humanity. You never know—things change.

There is true abundance. A cooperative society is possible. It will take a lot to get it in place, up and running, and work out all the problems.

The Future of Our Movements

"However, fragmented they may be at the present time, the political and social struggles waged in both the South and the North against various aspects of the dominant system are sufficiently evident and numerous for us not to have to list them here. Evidently too they are growing in number and strength with everyday that passes...To build the convergence of all social and political movements that give expression to the victims of neoliberal capitalism certainly demands respect for their diversity." (Amin, *Obsolescent Capitalism*, 139-140)

Ultimately, we must together think through what will sustain a movement for a cooperative society. What will hold it together as it faces the onslaught? We must lose the old sectarian differences and unite around the practical demands the "new class" of completely dispossessed.

We might begin to practice this right here on our own campus. So in honor of day of presence and obsolescent capitalism let me conclude with some thoughts on movement building. Much of it is a set of questions I think we have to consider.

Let me lay out a couple of things I see as key pieces

- a vision for what that society will look like
- militant patience and militant respect
- cooperative, respectful and just relations
- consciousness and commitment
- doing the day by day work, grind, and tedium
- organizations that aren't dependent on individuals

There's got to be a role for everyone. It's much harder to get together with imperfect people and build something that actually makes a difference.

In this final little bit I want to talk about some what gets called anti-oppression work on campuses. There is great work being done, but I think its also worth reflecting on. I just want to offer my observations and experiences as a very small resource. I know you all have all kinds of thoughts and ideas on this and I don't at all pretend that I have some kind of expert knowledge, just an analysis of some things I have seen after being at three campuses and following similar motion at other schools.

For me this means not just talking the talk and fingering the mistakes of others. Personally I think we get caught up in language games that allow us to peacock—you know strut around with our "super-radical" feathers gleaming in the sun—but don't hold ourselves accountable for doing the real work of building and sustaining movements. Its easier to point out people's flaws and oppressive behavior and feel real good about yourself doing it and think you are making a difference by making someone feel bad and look foolish. I know because I've done it and when I feel insecure I find myself still doing it. You learn a list of rules and then apply them to everywhere and everything the same. It's a cookie cutter approach.

I have found such work rife with assumptions about people and often so eager to "catch" people that it creates a mood of suspicion bordering on paranoia. This doesn't create an environment for movement building. But it makes sense to me that it thrives in a competitive environment. And it's a reasonable and in some forms and important response to real conditions of oppression, but I think they can end up misguided and misleading. Some kind of radical PC that most folks get tired of really quickly and fewer and fewer people come to meetings.

On campuses across the country, serious efforts at anti-oppression and movement building pop up all the time often but not always sparked by a hate crime. Unfortunately rarely are these efforts sustained in a major way. They appear and disappear. There are many reasons for this. First, is concrete conditions in academia of student turnover and homework, faculty and staff pushed to do more and more with less, and administrations who are often luke warm to the idea and want to do just enough to chill things out and avoid bad press. Second, is the loss of momentum that comes when school is not in session such as summer break. With this high rate of turnover there is very little memory or history that is maintained and these efforts end up having to start from scratch each time they are sparked. So with that in mind I think it is very important that those doing this work locate, document, and make accessible such efforts from the past. Some of you may have already done some of this. The disorientation manual might be one starting point, but there are plenty of others, like folks who have been here for a long time or even the Evergreen archives. Collect as many stories of the last forty years as possible. Make a time line. Look at the pattern of response from the administration. Know the history. Identify your base and expand it. Etc.

Another reason that these efforts aren't sustainable is that often the "leaders" of these important efforts can assume a kind of dogmatic, self-righteous, and oppressive brand of militancy that alienates a lot of potential allies because it seeks to only include "pure" people

who can prove their "radical" credentials by pointing out the mistakes/assumptions of others and calling out oppression any and everywhere as a rule. It becomes an exercise in demonstration and all kinds of kooky demonstrations occur. This is a great academic exercise, but not a very good organizing approach. I know for most folks this is a stage we may go through. But it also runs the risk of locating oppression solely in individuals and not in systems, relationships, institutions and practices. I have also seen the other side of this where its easy to avoid talking about racism and sexism by talking in big abstract ways. Now of course its individuals AND institutions, etc. So for me a big question I'm wrestling with is how to connect the macro and the micro. Because I have noticed a real tendency in liberal academia to push to cleanse people of things in a way that is really detached from the world we live in. Liberal guilt becomes the problem that gets solved, not racism, sexism, homophobia, ablism, ageism and other forms of oppression. And the overarching logic of domination and exploitation that IS capitalism skates free and gets pushed out of the picture for good.

People can change on an individual level of course, but how do we make a MOVEMENT through which people change together and people change institutions together to the point that all the people control and create the society. Its not easy work and I think sometimes folks can get frustrated and just end up buying organic or something because that's something concrete and tangible they can do. Its like helping someone revise their essay and just commenting on all the spelling errors: they're really easy to spot and real cut and dry how to fix them once you learn the rules. But movement building with actual human beings is never that simple. The whole culture of "calling someone out" can become like show trials or the worst forms of the cultural revolution in China and most people are really hesitant about getting involved when they see things like this going on. Besides this can be, like the show trials and Cultural Revolution can become easily manipulated. I've seen it used to sidetrack meetings entirely. Important and fundamental issues used, perhaps even purposely, in destruc-

tive ways. I've also seen those in power who can learn the language use it against any movement.

Now, of course I'm not at all saying that oppressive behavior should be tolerated; that's certainly not what I'm arguing and it's not just and doesn't build sustainable movements either. I don't believe there are different levels of priorities as has been proposed before... "first capitalism then racism" or ... "first capitalism then patriarchy." I believe in seeing all the connections where they exist. In previous periods in this country oppressive behavior would just be allowed and any questions of it would be called divisive and they would be silenced. This is wrong. But I do feel there has been an over-correction as I mentioned before. For me it's not about whether we face up to oppressive behavior—we must. The question for me is how we face up to oppressive behavior. This starts with figuring out who our allies are and who they aren't. I think you treat allies very differently than you treat enemies. And here I go back to Immortal Technique: our allies and cousins and those in our class are those all around us. Just about everyone we see. So how do we treat each other and build together.

Like our visitor from the fall Betita Martinez has written, "What frightens U.S. ruling-class circles is the linking of issues, strategies and, above all, people in struggle. What frightens them most is the prospect of grassroots alliances across national or racial lines."

So the questions for serious folks who want to make change is how to change oppressive behavior among individuals while always working to build movements for fundamental change. How do we deal with differences in productive ways? Those with unearned relative advantages, this includes all of us in different ways according to the situation, who want to take part in fundamental change must become self-aware and self-critical. It's a responsibility we all have, but it's especially important for those with specific privileges ever present to be conscious of: white supremacy, patriarchy, class privileges and assumptions, heteronormativity.

So really thinking together about how to make

a sustainable movement is absolutely important. Having those who are hip to the lingo or the "radicals" on board is great, but also important will be to get those involved who are not the "usual suspects." I think this involves getting more concrete and less abstract.

At Evergreen that means finding out What are people's issues around here on campus at Evergreen? What are the issues of different groups? What are the issues that folks of color face? Poor and working class whites? Women? Poor women of color? Students with disability? Queer students? Students from other countries?

There are all kinds of ways to find out. Listening is the key to all of them. Listening in seminar, to questions in public presentations, to tesctalk, to student groups, at days of absence/presence, etc. then there is going out and asking people what they think. This involves getting a team together and going out and listening to as many people as possible about what they think and what they would like to see. Through this you can also distribute info in a quality way--much more effective in my experiences than an email or flier. This also gives you a good sense of where people are at and what they could contribute at various stages of any campaign. Time consuming but important work.

But if we are to fight for people's needs and help give birth to a new, cooperative system, this might be some of the work that will help in doing it.

This week and over the next few we will be looking at various examples of places where people are attempting just this and in many ways succeeding.

As June Jordan once wrote:

And burrowing under everything you think
you know
some of us move slow
like inch worms
softening the earth
to bury you

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION