

black mold

Collected Essays

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...they lost the sense of being in a hostile environment, although hostile wasn't the word, an environment whose language they refused to recognize, an environment that existed on some parallel plane where they couldn't make their presence felt, imprint themselves, unless they raised their voices, unless they argued, something they had no intention of doing.

—2666, Roberto Bolaño

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.

—The Mark on the Wall, Virginia Woolf

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As we sit down to write this, one of the editors on the black mold payroll recently found out they're expecting. It's been an interesting few weeks since the news broke to all of us, expectant parent included, as it's made us think what a child born in 2026 might come to experience as they eventually age into the twilight years of the 21st century. From where we're standing now, temporally speaking, it all seems bad. The capitalism that emerged triumphantly from the first half of the 20th century has been on a steady decline more or less ever since. Since at least the 1970s, ruling classes worldwide have turned to increasingly contradictory and violent short term measures to contain the mounting crises, as the promise of perpetual capitalist growth has steadily broken down.

Unfortunately, this baby (referred to hereafter as our baby, due to the ownership stake the rest of us at black mold claim as guardians and bad influences) will not be born to a bourgeois family with the resources to drown out the warning bells of a mode of production in terminal decline with a cacophony of wasteful luxury and leisure. They are going to be born to a proletarian family where the two care-givers charged with somehow keeping them alive for their early years are decidedly average for the 21st century; that is to say, to a family where all members of the household are on precarious contracts, where housing and groceries are eating up an ever-expanding proportion of their monthly wages, where the next steps seem less obvious than they have in the past.

You could've asked the stork to bring you somewhere else, buddy.

It's hard not to see our baby being born as the impetus for this collection of essays. We've been so fixated on things ending that the prospect of something beginning has brought about a paradigm shift. Speaking for most of us here at black mold, our parent's generations were, on average, upwardly mobile, or at the very least able to find paths to secure work and housing. Our generation, however, faced with housing crises, rising prices and unpredictable job markets (to say nothing of war and the militarization of daily life), has not been so lucky. Being able to contrast our life paths with those of previous generations has been a large part of our own radicalization. For our baby, coming smack dab in the middle of

summer 2026, we can only imagine how strange it will be to be born into a world of very obvious crisis. In typical 20th century fashion, however, this crisis is not so straightforward. It feels like we're stuck in a historical rut, where nothing ever happens but it all keeps getting worse. Like the world is in an increasingly violent stasis, while everything tangible (healthcare, jobs, wages, the weather) is quietly falling apart. Compared to previous generations, our experience of the slow decline of capitalism has been one of seeing the promises of capitalist society slowly fade away. For our baby and the millions like it, those promises will be few and far between. They'll have to have bigger dreams.

But as bad as things are, it's very difficult to imagine capitalism fucking everything up so badly that it all abruptly collapses. As terminal as some of these crises may be, their finality may be deferred indefinitely, and they will affect proles unequally as they play out. So no matter what might be lurking in the latter half of this century, proles just like our baby are going to have to figure out how to survive and organize in circumstances very much not of their choosing. The first step to understanding what to do in these uncharted waters is, like in any other system, truthfully observing our surroundings, before orienting ourselves as organizers and acting accordingly.

Where we were perhaps more focused in our first collection on examining what a classless society would look like, how it would operate, strategic questions for approaching a transition, etc., we are going to take this opportunity to examine something like the superstructure of the crumbling society we live in today. What does it mean to understand collapse not as a sudden event, but as something we're all constantly experiencing in at times absurd ways? If the modern bourgeois political arena has taught us anything, it's that these superstructural elements are relevant to proletarian lives in ways that we as socialists may be too ready to ignore. If there is a research question to this collection of essays (a very big if), it's something like this: as capitalism declines, and its stewards pursue increasingly aggressive and erratic strategies to preserve shrinking profits and power, what does this forestalled collapse mean for our experiences first as proles, then as organizers?

The long and short of it, if you'd like to stop reading here, is nothing good. Many traditional left strategies are, for reasons outlined in our first collection as well as later on in this one, being shown to be fundamentally undynamic in the face of the chaos of our current moment. But before we get to strategy, we should, as we mentioned before, take a step back to observe our chaotic political and economic landscape.

OBSERVE

In a recent piece for Heatwave Magazine on the Trump administration's tariff regime, the communist collective Chuang recounted the tale of what they called the "soybean saga". In their telling, China retaliated against many of the tariffs imposed on their economy by Trump's first administration by raising tariffs of their own on the import of American soybeans. Soybeans, as boring as they seem, are massively important to the global economy and have a variety of uses, perhaps most importantly as a major protein source in animal feed. No soybeans, no cattle. No cattle, no burgers. No burgers...no America. The soybean tariff was thus poised to be incredibly detrimental to US consumers and farmers, many of the latter cultivating soybeans as a "safe" way to produce for the global economy.

But instead of everything just collapsing, global markets simply adjusted. China went on to buy the majority of its soybeans from Brazil instead of the United States, and American farmers sold their beans elsewhere. After a while, China resumed some soybean imports from the US and just ate the extra cost. Consumer prices rose, but not prohibitively.

The basic structure of global trade didn't collapse. Rerouted materials flowed in the same general direction, sold by the same consortiums of established firms and bought by the same customers, only with more middlemen. The real result was a global game of musical chairs, not a revolutionary decoupling. The "soybean triangle" between the U.S., Brazil, and China proved remarkably resilient — proof that deep supply chains and agricultural dependencies aren't undone by a few press conference threats

and tariff hikes. Life went on. Chinese workers paid more for pork. Americans paid more for electronics. The world economy adjusted, because that's what it does.¹

All this to say, the commodity economy adjusted in response to turbulence, because that's necessarily what it does while there's still profit to be had. Now, it didn't just go back to "normal" however. Consumer prices did rise after all. But the point is, despite a "renegade" American administration doing its best to reshape the international order, politicians and capitalists the world over are all still bound by the same rules. Global trade does need to continue in some form, and at the end of the day all that matters to the system is that capital continues to accumulate.

Now having said all that, there are several processes underway in the global economy that hint at what might be terminal crises for capitalism. We might summarize them simply and perhaps slightly inaccurately as the interrelated crises of deindustrialization and un-/under-employment. To expand, the first of these crises is related to what can be called the high organic composition of capital. In the face of constant pressure to be the most productive firm in any given sector, capitalists the world over have replaced a relatively large portion of "living labor" with "dead labor". Production lines have been automated to the extent that there is simply less relative need for workers in the global productive economy. Because capital relies on the difference between the price of labor power and its other productive inputs on one hand and the price it is able to realize for its commodity in the marketplace on the other, global capital is increasingly seeing fewer and fewer safe opportunities for productive investment. Unfortunately for everyone, however, productive industries remain necessary.

This leads us to the second material underpinning of the current crises, and that is (in capital's eyes) an enormous and ever-growing "surplus" population. The reserve army of labor, that segment of the population that is structurally un-/underemployed, has grown to such an extent that large parts of it are simply not in reserve anymore. They're just per-

1. Chuang (2025). TRUMP II: Trade War Gone Global, Heatwave Magazine.

manently unemployed, or permanently precariously employed, with no real hope of full employment.

To explain that point a bit further, Marx developed the idea of the reserve army of labor as a means of explaining

- A) why an increase in the accumulation of capital involved an increase of in the general numbers of the proletariat,
- B) why the ranks of the proletariat increase at a faster rate than the accumulation of capital and
- C) how capital uses this reserve army as a way of keeping wages as low as possible.

To Marx,

Since capital only increases when it employs workers, the increase of capital involves an increase of the proletariat, and, as we have seen, according to the nature of the relation of capital and labour, the increase of the proletariat must proceed relatively even faster.²

As the ranks of the proletariat relatively increase in relation to capital, the wages it can command face a downward pressure as, just like every other commodity, when its supply is greater than its demand, its price drops. But capital does not accumulate in even measures across time and industries. It accumulates in fits and bursts, and thus its relationship to this mass of unemployed labor also changes. As the organic composition of capital rises and less labor is present in the production process to be exploited (ie, profited off of), while at the same time there is way too high a supply of labor looking for employment, we have a recipe for disaster: a mode of production that is collapsing as it undermines its own source of profit.

This plays out globally in startling ways. In the essay *The Long Slow Death of Global Development*, David Oks and Henry Williams ex-

2. Karl Marx (1847). Wages.

plain the way in which a large section of this global reserve army was “absorbed” into the capitalist economy when they were not conventionally needed.

Almost by default, this surplus labor was absorbed into a nebulous economic stratum which economists categorize, quite euphemistically, as part of the “service sector.” In the public imagination, the standard archetypes of these service workers are the call-center workers and IT professionals of Bangalore or Manila. It is this variety of outsourced, globalized labor that led some economists to optimistically sketch a “services-led development” model for countries like India in the 1990s and 2000s. But far more common than this relatively skilled labor pool is a different, more plebeian variety: the low-productivity work, overwhelmingly informal, casual, and irregular, that has come to define the social landscapes of poor-world cities. The Dutch sociologist Jan Breman, in his study of employment in southern Gujarat, calls the workers of this informal sector “wage hunters and gatherers”: the unlicensed taxi drivers, roadside fruit peddlers, freelance porters, squeegee men and women, bidi rollers, beggars, rag pickers, clothing resellers, small-time scammers and thieves, bazaar porters, and general-purpose unskilled jobbers who constitute the majority of the populations of cities everywhere from Kabul to Kabinda to Managua. These low-skill service workers are far more numerous than their high-skill, formalized counterparts: about 90 percent of the hundreds of millions of jobs created in India since its liberalization process began in 1991, for instance, have been in the “informal sector,” not in the much-vaunted IT industry.³

Besides this global drop in employment quality, the decrease in opportunities for investment and the attendant drop in the need for

3. David Oks and Henry Williams (2022). The Long, Slow Death of Global Development.

employed proles has led to large migrations as proles seek out potential opportunities for employment across borders. This, in turn, has qualitatively changed the roles many countries play in the global hierarchy of trade and border security, a topic we will return to in a later essay in this collection.

So we'll repeat, in spite of the many political machinations playing out globally on top of these crises, these processes remain perhaps the fundamental determinants of our time. It is getting harder to see how capital is going to come up with permanent solutions for either of them as it continues to lay track in front of a train rapidly approaching a cliff we can all see coming. But let's not get it confused. There is still plenty of time left for capitalism unless something changes. It isn't just all going to fall down on its own, and if the soybean saga and the million other stories like it have taught us anything, it's that the process of capital accumulation is so dominant that control over the production process is out of our collective hands. It's a globe-spanning, self-controlling system, to which the capitalists are slaves just as much as we are. What is more than likely is not a sudden crunch whereby the Trump administration fucks everything up so badly that there's an abrupt system-wide collapse; the likeliest of outcomes is a slow demise where everything gets a little worse everyday for the lucky among us, and opportunities for earning a wage and a comfortable life disappear for the rest of us. Collapse is felt in different ways in different times and spaces. To this too, we will return in a later essay.

ORIENT

Attendant to this stagnation has been a decline in the possibilities for traditional left organizing. As we showed in our previous issue, union organizing and mass party building are most successful in times of capitalist prosperity. Socialist politics attract fellow proles because unions and parties are able to offer them tangible benefits. When profit rates are high, capitalists are capable of sharing these profits (when forced) in the form of higher wages or types of welfare. However, when profits are at their slimmest, capitalists know that any further disruption to their margins will endanger the entire system. Threats of strike action fall on deaf ears,

as capitalists know that without a sizable strike fund or parallel structures for communal social reproduction, workers will eventually be forced to return to work with greatly reduced demands.

Yet the core social contradictions of capitalism remain. Despite the lack of a worker's movement and a relatively small share of proles working in the productive sectors of the economy (the traditional core of radical social democracy), we are all still proles operating at the whims and mercy of the law of value. It leaves us with a conundrum that is seemingly insurmountable: socialism remains necessary, yet we cannot rely solely on historically conventional socialist organizing strategies.

In light of this situation, it's worth orienting ourselves in line with the popular strategic theories on the left today. With the exception of anarchism, which we really should talk about one day, there are two broad strategies in this context that are in vogue among our fellow agitators. One is something like a communizer-influenced ultra-leftism, and the other is your blasé, run of the mill social democracy.

The Ultra-Left

In our first issue, when we tried our best to give our thoughts on why it is that no socialist movement has cohered despite the clear signs of global decay, we did so through a series of engagements with popular communizer theory. Briefly, our thesis followed closely to Joshua Clover's meshing of Robert Brenner's Long Downturn and Giovanni Arrighi's crisis periodization (without some of the political extrapolations). The meshing goes like this:

1. According to Arrighi, in the wake of the inevitable cyclical crises that follow the capitalist business cycle, investment flows out of the productive sectors of the economy (seen by investors as too risky to keep in their investment portfolios) and into the "safe havens" of finance and circulation. Growth in industry and manufacturing slows, job growth slows, finance capital balloons with no real opportunities for feasible productive investment. In the past, all those fallow bank accounts have found a

rising economic power to soak up all its money. This was once England, once the United States, once East Asia, now..?

2. Now maybe nowhere, as Brenner and his cohorts believe that opportunities for productive investment are now not only harder to come by, but perhaps not coming back. To quote Clover, "Productive capital held sway from, say, 1784 to 1973. It may yet again. For the moment, this seems uncertain. Far from underwriting a rising hegemon, the United States in its decline is - despite its hypertrophied financial sector - ending its run as a massive debtor nation. It is now possible to argue that, even at a global or systemic level, capital finds itself in a phase of circulation not being met by rising production elsewhere..."⁴

The key insight of this bleak periodization is that class consciousness, ideologies and revolutionary political horizons are, to an extent, shaped by the evolving forms of accumulation of capitalist society. As capital develops new forms of accumulation, now productive, now circulatory, the political horizon for a socialist project changes with it. Practically, this is because the struggle over control of production becomes a direct struggle when more workers are engaged in productive work. The constant friction between the owners of the means of production and the workers they employ sees workers necessarily questioning the unreasonable arrangement private property offers them. Ideologically speaking, this sees more opportunity for political agitation that rallies workers behind a project aimed at radically reworking the productive relations of society.

Class struggle in times where the dominant forms of accumulation are circulatory (i.e. finding profit in dismantling public institutions and replacing them with private ones, price fixing, arbitrage, dangerous speculation, etc) takes on a different character, both ideologically and practically. The fundamental basis of capitalist society, private ownership of the means of production, is obscured, and the struggle against it becomes a struggle against high prices, billionaires and those few bad apples in the police or in government. Our point being, instead of directing our

4. Joshua Clover (2019). Riot. Strike. Riot.

unrivaled power as a class towards the base of all that is evil and corrupt (private property and production for exchange), our power is diluted and pitted up against a thousand superstructural struggles, none of which can ever be solved permanently without abolishing class. Class struggle is reduced to a technocratic wish list: higher taxes on the rich, cuts to military spending and the replacement of governments staffed by idiots and bigots with governments staffed merely by psychopaths (though admittedly, this is an increasingly unnecessary distinction).

But this is where we perhaps begin to diverge from Clover and his ilk. Clover's political extrapolations from this sobering analysis place the riot front and center in the struggle for a classless society. Why? Because for him, and many others now in the ultra-left/communizer milieu, they hint at something to come. They presage the creation of autonomous zones, where proles kick police out of their neighborhoods and begin the process of political self-organization. Yadda yadda yadda, something something something, auto zones, then communism. There's a critique to be leveled here that compares this political strategy to a kind of adventurist collapse fetishization, but we tend to think that would be a bad faith interpretation. Clover and the communizers in general aren't advocating for the collapse of modern society so much as predicting it will happen whether we want it to or not. Which hey, fair enough.

Where we differ is by saying that this is simply not good enough for a socialist agitator. There is nothing in the formation of self-governing autonomous zones that necessarily leads to the essence of a socialist society, namely, communal property relations and production for use. It might well be that once police are kicked out of urban neighborhoods we'll have the space to organize production on our own terms, but a true socialist strategy does not begin with the question of political but economic organization. What matters most is that workplaces are organized democratically with a scalable organizational form that allows for planning, that workers are remunerated for their work in a directly social manner and, in a nearly identical fashion, that all firms are communally reproduced regardless of productivity. This is the basis of a socialist society.

Now, obviously, the objection to this would be that none of this is possible at all without first breaking the repressive apparatuses of the state. Which of course is true. If we managed to build councils in San Bernardino tomorrow, ICE, the police and the military would just storm in, kill everyone, and import new workers to operate by capitalist standards. But what we would say is that the two things need to go hand in hand. A direct confrontation with the state anywhere today is doomed to be crushed. Where this has succeeded in the past was due to a generalized breakdown of the bonds that held the servants of the state together. And what are the bonds that hold the state and all its repressive apparatuses together? Private property and wage labor.

Our critique of the communizers, who are of course fellow travelers and count many of the most principled organizers active today among their ranks, is not that the smashing of the repressive state shouldn't be priority #1 to any revolutionary movement. It's that without an adequate solution to what would replace the social relations of capitalism at a concrete level, no level of state destruction will ever be good enough to supersede this hellworld. The best you'd get is generalized collapse and chaos. There is a way that communism needs to work at a base level in order for class not to rear its ugly head ever again. It is not enough to simply create autonomous zones and wing it from there. The key determinant of society will always be its social relations. Everything else is epiphenomenal from there.

Social Democracy

What do you call someone who does the same thing over and over expecting different results? Well, you'd probably just call them a Marxist, but for the purposes of this joke let's just call them social democrats.

By social democrats we generally mean organizers who hold to some variety of the merger theory, though this idea has decayed in many circles to kind of just mean electoralism. To be fair, there are many socialists doing good work in places like the DSA, People Before Profit, Your Party, the various green parties, or some similar loose coalition of progressives in an attempt to bring soft socialist principles to the bourgeois

political area. And honestly, despite what we might say about the possibility of building a proletarian movement this way, we aren't sure that any of us would just want to see this area of struggle entirely ceded to the ruling classes and their progressive lackeys. So whatever.

But a lot of the strategies and attitudes of the social democrats, from your "I've read Lenin" Marxist unity types to your Bernie progressives, still revolve around psychotically out of touch ideas. To take the "Step one: read What is to be Done? Step Two: Do That" Lenin types first, there is an extreme fetishization of form inherent in their approach to class struggle. When we look back at the history of proletarian struggles, we have certain milestones that we treat as progressive steps on the march towards socialism. But we cannot treat each growth in class consciousness as advancements towards a teleological, predetermined end goal. Each advancement and retrenchment was specific to its own time and its own space. Thus, we cannot idealize any one moment or movement as the one true form of class struggle. The SPD in Germany between Marx's later years and when they all voted in favor of imperialist war is frequently invoked in social democratic circles as the ideal form of class organization. Its proponents point to its huge membership as well as letters Marx wrote engaging with their movement through critiques and praises as proof that this is what we all need to be aiming for. But of course, this was a movement that, first of all, failed spectacularly, and secondly was unique to its operational environment. An operational environment that was radically different to anything we have now.

Social democracy, as we touched on earlier, relies on fulfilling a niche in capitalism that is only present in times of growth. The niche in question is pretty reprehensible regardless, as it de facto becomes a way to encourage proles to political action by pointing out, oftentimes explicitly, the evils of capitalism, but then betraying them by suggesting it can all be solved by more rational management of production and a bigger slice of the pie for labor. But this becomes impossible when capitalists are less willing to share that pie slice as it shrinks both relatively and absolutely. Capitalists resort to force to keep proles in line and social democrats resort to voting for war credits to keep their cushy no-work/pay jobs in the

capitalist bureaucracy. Everyone wins! Except the proles.

There are elucidations of modern social democracy, however, which are more time and place specific to today. One of these came in Cosmonaut in the form of an article titled *A Twelve-Step Program for Democrat Addiction* by Jenna Grove. The piece is more or less an application of the ideas of Mike MacNair and his ilk to the United States, or more specifically, to Marxists operating within the DSA, referred to here as “the flagship organization for American socialists.” For Grove, the reasoning behind organizing within the DSA as socialists is simple. “Where its competitors have three or four-digit memberships, [the DSA’s] rolls will soon break 100,000. It is the ideal place to hammer out some kind of future for ourselves.”⁵

For all the grief we might give social democrats, the ideas here are enticing. This wing of modern Marxism recognizes that, to quote MacNair, there can be no “conning of the working class into power” by attempting to surreptitiously abandon the word socialism in favor of a broad, vaguely progressive political project. Instead, Grove and Cosmonaut at large advocate for a “long-term political struggle,”⁶ outlined in this specific piece by a twelve point program for meaningful socialist political action within the DSA. The steps are:

1. Declare political independence.
2. Hold annual conventions.
3. Form statewide organizations.
4. Cultivate a committed membership base.
5. Adopt a nationwide political platform.
6. Run dedicated organizers for office.
7. Stop endorsing outside the party.
8. Choose ballot lines at the state level.
9. Target the House of Representatives.
10. Agitate for electoral reform.
11. Shoot down war budgets.

5. Jenna Grove (2020). *A Twelve-Step Program for Democrat Addiction*, Cosmonaut Magazine.

6. Ibid.

12. Demand a new constitution.⁷

We aren't interested here in whether these demands are realistic or not. Part of being a socialist is making what seem to be radically unrealistic demands right up until the moment they aren't. So to criticize the demand for, say, a new constitution as impractical is, to us, not helpful. What would be helpful, we think, is questioning whether this does actually represent what Grove calls "a complete break in our way of conceptualizing political power."⁸

The break that is being described here is the respectable (and perhaps even necessary) approach to building independent working class political organs. Ignoring what you may think about the DSA, this idea has merit. Movements from the grassroots origins of Black Lives Matter to, you know, the entirety of the American union complex have been subsumed into the Democratic party through promises of funding, support and high profile platforms for staffers. Attempting to build structures that sit outside of the control of the Democratic party is not just a question of preference for socialists, it's a question of autonomy and, in the case of movements like BLM, a matter of safety and survival. But, as we saw in our previous issue, the success of demands such as those listed previously are tied directly to the forms of accumulation in capitalist society. We spoke at length last issue about the assumptions of the so-called strategy of patience, one of which being the assumption that the socialist movement of the turn of the century could be replicated under conditions not of capitalist growth, but of capitalist collapse. The changing nature of work outlined briefly in the sections above is simply ignored in many of these social democratic strategies. It's simply assumed that old forms will "work" today to the same extent they did in, say, the glory days of the SPD (which, we must remember, ended in disaster).

But at the risk of relitigating topics from our previous issue, what must be said about the Marxist social democratic left today is that it remains thoroughly unimaginative, and falls into the exact same trap as

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

many in the communization tradition. Namely, that the means become everything, the end nothing. Perhaps out of fear of sounding utopian, or simply making an error, social democrats balk whenever they are expected to outline the nature of communism. Is it just the democratic republic? Is it just whatever Lenin was talking about in *The State and Revolution*? More often than not, their answers are strikingly similar to communizers: communism is a rational, democratically planned society.

Ah great.

As we get to in a later essay, this is simply not an acceptable political economy for the future classless society. It is too vague, too easily distorted by anti-socialist political projects to mean much of anything. If the communist party is supposed to do what the social democrats want it to do, namely, lead the proletariat to communism, it needs to be able to clarify something like a working political economy for the social relations of communism. And, we might stress again, this needs to be based in the coming society's social relations, not in appeals to rationality. How is work remunerated without the law of value asserting itself? How do we avoid reversion to a class-based system of production? We're not asking you to write *The Dispossessed* here. We simply expect an analysis of this type would do much to eschew faith in an outdated, politics-first model, which, beyond simple slogans and membership drives, does not offer your average prole much of anything.

Many in this milieu come from a liberal background and are unimaginatively wedded to the aforementioned critique of the irrationality of capitalism. Capitalism is wildly irrational, of course, but this cannot be the basis of a materialist critique. The irrationality is epiphenomenal to the competition and incentives that come from production for exchange and privately owned productive firms. To simply ask for kinder bosses, more well-educated technocrats, a more benevolent state, a military more environmental in its approach to war, isn't enough. As the wise man once said, "reforms presuppose a reformable capitalism. So long as it has this character, the revolutionary nature of the working class exists only in

latent form.”⁹

There are two critiques to be expected from what we’ve said about social democracy. The first is perhaps simply that a proletarian political movement paves the way for the introduction of economic measures that could change the social structure of society. Many who might make this critique still hold to a teleological view of the struggle for socialism, whereby countries must finish their bourgeois revolutions, institute true universal suffrage and build a state adequate to the needs of the proletariat. But to us, the fundamentally unique crisis situation of our modern era precludes this kind of organizing, as any kind of progressive political movement is seen as a threat to what little surplus the ruling classes are still able to exploit. The only strategies that will work to push for socialism are those which directly confront not only the capitalist state but its fundamental basis - say it with us now - private property and production for exchange.

The second critique is, we think, much more fair. And that is that, to be honest, nobody really knows what it will take to get to socialism in terms of strategy. Our research project has been aimed at understanding what socialism is in order to inform our strategies, but concretely, it’s very hard to definitively say at this point what will work and what won’t. Because of that, allowing any one theater of struggle to go unoccupied by socialists would be a strategic blunder. To sit back and let the fight for meaningful reforms or even attempts to abolish or rework state constitutions be ceded to liberals would be a mistake. Truthfully, we don’t disagree with this a huge amount. Our disagreement comes not in the effort to tear down the “slaveholder constitution”¹⁰ of the United States, but in a systemic understanding of what it means to struggle successfully. When we think about our concrete positions as agitators and organizers, abstractions that glorify certain strategic forms over others for historic or ideological reasons won’t do. We need to be analyzing where we are, what our circumstances are and acting accordingly. No one form of struggle will do in all arenas of proletarian struggle. What works in the urban United States may not work in the hinterlands of rural Mexico,

9. Paul Mattick (1976). *The New Capitalism and the Old Class Struggle*.

10. Jenna Grove (2021). *Fight the Constitution! Demand a New Republic!*

the refugee camps of Jordan or war torn Ukraine. If our critique of social democrats is able to leave you with anything, let it be this. The class struggle is a dynamic and complicated fight. As the nature of work changes in different ways for the different segments of the proletariat, so too do the needs of our class in its fight for survival against capital. There's a fine line between principled, "unrealistic" demands for a classless society and empty demands for a fairer state. To us, the ends are everything, the means perpetually evolving.

DECIDE

Back when optimism or, perhaps more accurately, faith, was in vogue in the socialist movement, astronomer Anton Pannekoek reasoned what a realistic approach to class struggle might look like. Instead of expecting proles to all of a sudden occupy their workplaces, instigate a large-scale class war and overthrow the state, we might expect intermediate forms of struggle to emerge as we come to understand the true scale of our collective class power. A sudden break in support for trade unions or bourgeois political parties was, to a point, unrealistic. "Thus," he said. "The two forms of organization and fight stand in contrast, the old one of trade unions and regulated strike, the new one of spontaneous strike and workers' councils."

This does not mean that the former at some time will be simply substituted by the latter as the only alternative. Intermediate forms may be conceived, attempts to correct the evils and weakness of trade unionism and preserve its right principles; to avoid the leadership of a bureaucracy of officials, to avoid the separation by narrow craft and trade interests, and to preserve and utilize the experiences of former fights.¹¹

This remains as true to us now as it did to Pannekoek writing 80 years ago in nazi occupied Holland. As organizers and agitators, we must resist asking ourselves why our fellow proles won't listen to us or why they haven't completed their world historic mission of overthrowing capital-

11. Anton Pannekoek (1947). *Workers' Councils*.

ism yet. Instead, our first priority needs to be understanding how these diffuse actions can be connected or, perhaps more specifically, how the information learned from each successive failure can be imputed into the next action to make it more resilient and class conscious.

If it feels like we're fence sitting, that's more or less the point. We think the first step towards serious political action today must begin with being honest with ourselves. A sober analysis of the world today would have to come to the conclusion that despite the wars and famines, the migrations and emigrations, the growing precariousness of pay and housing, there simply is not much of an appetite for a properly socialist political project. There's plenty of potential for vaguely anti-capitalist projects across the political spectrum, most of which comes in the form of a soft progressivism able to motivate large numbers of proles but unable to properly challenge state hegemony. But if you go around talking about worker's councils or overthrowing the capitalist ruling class, you come off sounding out of touch.

But this is why it is more important than ever to hold the line. The demands for a truly classless society, the only form of social organization that can weather the coming calamities, seem out of touch only because they have been diluted and delegitimized not only by the ruling class but by socialists themselves. As we saw with the saga of the soybeans, capital is a normalizing force. It flattens every hope and every desire we have into mere instruments of accumulation. The only way out of this political quicksand is to refuse to play by its rules. As long as our demands are for autonomous zones for their own sake or for a different constitution to rule in the old one's place, we will continue to fail. It's only by placing the productive relations of society at the core of a political strategy that we will ever see a classless society begin to form. If the demand for communal productive relations seems unrealistic, so be it. Many of us forget that the communist project has always depended on what seems like an unrealistic hope, that our fellow proles will develop enough collective consciousness to act against capitalist social relations and in favor of building communism. To give up hope that this will happen is to give up hope in a better world. As every letter and every diary entry written on the eve of

every revolution has taught us, no one expects things to change, even on the eve of full scale rebellion. Our demands are radical, right up until the moment they are not.

ACT

The first essay presented here in our second issue is *Surplus in Our Own Society*, by black mold stalwart Jack F. When we sat down to brainstorm ideas for how to write about the superstructure of crisis in this strange era of capitalism, we realized very quickly that we were going to have to have an essay devoted solely to modern immigration politics. As said in the essay,

Immigration has come to dominate an ever-expanding portion of political discourse. Everything from public services to foreign policy is increasingly refracted through the lens of immigrants and their supposed effects on society.¹²

But this essay is doing slightly more than attempting to explain why proles give their support to fascist regimes rooted in deportation and hyper-exploitation. It gives an analysis of just why these political projects have cross-party support from almost all factions of the ruling class and why they've come about. The economic underpinnings of the scapegoating of immigrants go a long way to explaining our current moment, and this is why we decided this should be the first essay in the collection. Additionally, the stances socialist political projects take on immigration will tell you plenty about whether these groups have the real interests of our class at heart.

Next we have *Agroecology & Revolutionary Politics*, written by Jack E. and T. Stearnes. This one is pretty self-explanatory. It's an analysis of the state of global food security and an argument that the framework of agroecology is a necessary part of the socialist political project. The authors argue that there's a reciprocal relationship between agroecology and socialism, going so far to say that you cannot have one without the other. This is because a truly ecological agricultural system cannot be

12. Jack F (2026), (in about 6 pages).

implemented with private property as the basis of society, and that likewise, socialism will need to perceive agriculture as a series of ecological systems if it ever wants to build food security with communal property relations. There's a lot of woo woo stuff out there on the left when it comes to agriculture, and this essay attempts to go beyond the permaculture/food forest stuff by really trying to nail down what a proper methodology would look like if we as socialists want to feed the global population with healthy, nutritious food - something capitalism has consistently failed to do.

"It's a strange phenomenon that as the world enters a long, slow decline, most conversations about preparing for collapse are dominated by the far right." So begins J. V. Marsch in their essay *Eschatology and Genesis*, a treatise on the politics of collapse. We figured if we were going to do a whole issue on the superstructure of a society in decline, it would behoove us to write something about collapse prepping. Preppers are an interesting bunch. They are those among us who are afflicted with a sheer terror at the real (and imagined) crises of capitalist civilization, but who have decided to prepare for the worst in a series of bad, strange and frequently "self-sufficient" ways. But, and this is the point of this essay, self-sufficiency is a myth. The only way to successfully prepare for a broadly defined collapse event is to do so by relying on our collective capabilities. Thus, socialists need ways to engage with proles facing extreme weather events, civil unrest, etc., and to show them that in prepping for the worst, they need to be both anti-capitalist and, positively speaking, looking to build something new. Frequently, support for political projects follows real capabilities on the part of a political movement to give people material support. How we do this in the face of the myriad crises of capitalist society will, to a large part, determine the success of any movement for a classless society. In one of our favorite quotes from this collection, we have Marsch's immortal line "to a very real extent, the only kind of prepping for collapse that would permanently work is just seizing the means of production." That about says it all, we think.

Now we have something of a fever dream. There are few things in this world capable of pushing staff writer Alice Springs over the edge,

but, as we learned recently, one of those things is a mormon influencer livestreaming (and getting in the way of) people attempting to flee the scene of an assassination while plugging his TikTok account and telling people to read the Book of Mormon. Written in the 24 hours that followed the assassination of huckster supreme Charlie Kirk, *Act Naturally* is part analysis of the career of the dearly departed and part criticism of the “hyperindividualized performance” that gets passed off as modern politics. The Kirk thing threw everybody for a loop because it was another violent outburst in an incredibly violent system that we all pretend isn’t fundamentally based on violence. Kirk, like everyone else on your screen, was a stand-in for whatever your politics might be. Depending on your algorithm, that might have been the concept of American fascism, or it might have been brave man with big head saying it like it is. Regardless, when that concept had its neck blown open in front of a few hundred smartphones, it was an opportunity for everyone to give Their Take™ on What’s Wrong With America Today. And really, can you think of anything worse than everyone giving their takes on what’s wrong with America today?

We’d be lying if we said at least a part of this essay wasn’t written to dunk on Kirk one last time, but really what it’s trying to convey is that what passes for political action today is, definitionally speaking, simply not politics. Much of it is based on attempting to prove to the world why you are right, why everyone else is wrong, and how you can use that to build a brand to, surprise surprise, make money. There’s no real economic analysis here. Not a lot of materialism either. Just a very stressed out author attempting to put it all on the page before social media in the aftermath of the Kirk shooting made her lose her mind.

Next we have what’s become something of a tradition here, which is a review of a piece of communization theory. *The Test of Communism* by J. Gibson is a review of Jasper Bernes’ recent book *The Future of Revolution*. Readers familiar with black mold will be aware of our general tendency towards critiques of communization (explained as recently as several pages ago), so we won’t belabor it here. This review, however, attempts to rescue Marx’s theory of labor-time calculation and his view

of high and low stage communism from criticisms of those on the ultra-left, which, as we have also argued, closely and suspiciously resembles criticisms from your more Lenin-brained socialists. While we certainly don't think it's enough to calculate labor-time in this fashion and call what you're doing communism, it also would be a mistake to, as Bernes believes we can, skip straight to high stage communism. We'll let Gibson cover why. What the answer winds up being is heavily related to what it is we mean when we say that one mode of production must necessarily subsume, both formally and really, all the parts of the previous mode that it is superseding. If we were to ever write a useless political program based on the ideas espoused by black mold, you'd find much of its core explicated in the pages of this review. Plus, this one comes with a free addendum on the concept of subsumption. What a deal.

And finally, in our laziest publication yet, we simply asked a friend of ours if we could directly copy several short articles from their cybernetics blog to include in our second issue. These pieces by Donal Costello are from the like-named *Office for Control Over Results* (theofficeforcontroloverresults.wordpress.com). The purpose of Donal's blog has been to write about the field he works in, namely, management cybernetics. Modern production systems are a really excellent example of productive forces outgrowing our production relations, and the former being stunted as a result. It's becoming increasingly clear that recent innovations in productivity could only be implemented in a classless society. The Toyota Production System and Volvo's forgotten innovations in their Kalmar and Uddevalla assembly plants speak to the necessity of a change in production relations if we ever want a maximally efficient and humanist alternative to the drudgery of capitalist production lines.

Donal's essays in this collection have been edited together to cover several topics on the question of production design. It's an interesting look into a world that seems alien to us by virtue of the relations of capitalist society. However, taking these ideas forward, it's clear that these would be the types of questions about labor that every member of a socialist society would necessarily engage with daily. If labor is being managed by those that labor and the entire productive apparatus has

been demystified, understanding how these systems work would be of interest to everyone. And they would be *interesting* to everyone as well. Additionally, systems theory is, at its core, a very abstract science. It's able to be applied to everything from ecosystems to Kit Kat factories to global supply chains. The same questions that arise in designing systems to dip wafer into chocolate in the most cost efficient way can be applied to political organizing. We've said plenty on this in the past, so all we'll say here is that in reading Donal's articles, know that his ideas don't just have to be applied to factories. As our organizational systems as socialists are tossed onto uncertain political terrain, it remains as important as ever to be thinking about organization as systems in order to better navigate the tumults of our modern times.

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Right, so there you have it, issue two in the books. What now? Who knows. Our times feel very intermediate in their nature. Purgatorial. It seems both like nothing ever happens and that terrible things are constantly happening all around us. But this is why it's more important than ever to hold the line as socialists. We simply want it all.

Ah, and one more thing before we go. Since our first issue, a number of you have asked "why the name black mold?" To which we reply, please mind your own business.

—the black mold editorial team



SURPLUS IN OUR OWN SOCIETY

BY JACK F.

The above theory, however, which is also expressed as a law of nature, that population grows faster than the means of subsistence, is the more welcome to the bourgeois as it silences his conscience, makes hard-heartedness into a moral duty and the consequences of society into the consequences of nature, and finally gives him the opportunity to watch the destruction of the proletariat by starvation as calmly as other natural event without bestirring himself, and, on the other hand, to regard the misery of the proletariat as its own fault and to punish it. To be sure, the proletarian can restrain their natural instinct by reason, and so, by moral supervision, halt the law of nature in its injurious course of development.

—Karl Marx, *Wages*

Proles in the imperial core of the world have, for a long time, flirted with, been sold and acted upon racist and xenophobic ideologies.

These ideologies, which of course have their origin in an international division of labor and thus private property, have been a part of capitalism since its genesis. But to simply leave it at that - that violent, anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics are, like most other ills in our modern world, products of our social relations - would be lazy and not particularly helpful. It would fail to explain the specificity of our own historic moment - a moment defined by ICE raids, small boats, shifting alliances and migrating populations.

Why have the global ruling classes closed ranks and built cross-party support for harsh immigration policies in recent years? Why does this manifest as racist ideology sold to the proletariat? And what does all this mean for a modern socialist movement?

THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

Immigration has come to dominate an ever-expanding portion of political discourse. Everything from public services to environmental concerns to foreign policy is increasingly refracted through the lens of immigrants and their supposed effects on society. Unsurprisingly, this entire conversa-

tion has lurched dramatically to the right in recent years, with liberal and left parties in the imperial core tailing their wannabe fascist colleagues on the right by demonizing both illegal and legal immigrants.

This included both the United States under Biden and its European satrap, the United Kingdom currently under Keir Starmer's Labour Party. Examples include:

- The Biden administration's chaotic yet ultimately vicious stance on immigration, from defending in court the Trump I invocation of Title 42 (a method of turning away asylum seekers at the border, a practice that was invoked nearly 3 million times in the several year long modern lifespan of Title 42) before replacing it with even harsher, more permanent policies;¹ to the strong arming of Mexico to force it to track, arrest and deport migrants travelling through Mexico before they reach the US border (problem solved! Oh wait he still lost the next election).²
- The Labour government in the UK maintaining Tory restrictions on immigration introduced in 2024 including the "ban on partners and children of care workers and most overseas students," as well as massively curtailing refugee family reunions, an increase in wait times for the granting of permanent settled status and raising the skilled worker salary threshold first from £26,200 to £38,700, then again in 2025 to a staggering £41,700.³

The browbeating that middle class liberals give other, more progressive proles every election to "vote for the lesser of two evils" have suddenly seen their hopes for a kinder technocracy dissipate before their eyes. Starmerites in the UK have seen their beloved Labour Party repeat fascist dog whistles copied directly from Enoch Powell⁴ and Democrats in

1. Justo Robles (2023). "Title 42 migration restrictions have ended, but Biden's new policy is tougher", The Guardian.

2. Mary Beth Sheridan (2024). "How Mexico is helping Biden and Harris at the U.S. border", The Washington Post.

3. Mihnea Cuibus (2026). "Labour's pledges on migration: the data", The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford.

4. Joshua Nevett & Henry Zeffman (2025). "Starmer says he regrets using 'island of strangers' phrase", BBC News.

America have been forced to defend why kids in cages at the border are actually good for US civil society, as Biden carried the policy of storing immigrants in filthy, crowded tent cities before their eventual deportation through his administration.⁵ Even little Ireland, in a far, foggy corner of Europe has seen many of its major parties spout anti-immigrant hate, concealed to varying degrees, with the current government rolling out new, stricter criteria for immigration that smack of copying the homework of the British Labour Party (who in turn, are simply copying Reform).⁶

It would be nice if we could hope that this shocking dose of reality would eschew the ideas many voters have in their heads about politics simply being an issue of “voting the right people into office”, but that is unlikely. Even if politics were simply a matter of the right people in the right offices, we would still be talking about political actors tied both structurally and financially to the rule of capital. Some are just nicer in the way they verbalize their intentions. Ultimately, the set of actions politicians have to choose from to navigate from one crisis to another are narrowly constrained by the requirement to maximize profitability for as many sectors as possible while maintaining political support. We can reason, then, that the shift to the right and rising importance of immigration politics is owing to the needs of capital in a rapidly changing world.

But again, an analysis at this level of flippancy risks not being useful, even if it is broadly true. We need to understand what it is that has changed in the economic base of our society that has necessitated this political and social shift.

COMMON SENSE (derogatory)

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is most obvious to see how modern immigration politics serve capital by looking not to the fascist ideologies of Reform, the GOP, One Nation, Rassemblement National, AfD or even the wannabes in Independent Ireland, but to the centrist liberal parties.

5. “Child migrants: First photos emerge of Biden-era detention centres”, (2021). BBC News.

6. Joe Mag Raollaigh (2026). “Proposed reforms to immigration laws to make system ‘fairer’ - O’Callaghan”. RTE.

Within all “centrist” discussions of immigration, we find the idea of Common Sense. What is Common Sense in regards to immigration? It’s the maintenance of strong borders in the interest of supposed rationality. It therefore praises the hard working attitudes of the “good” migrants - the migrants that come “here” from “there”, that don’t ask for too much, are willing to follow the rules and wait their turn to become hard-working members of society (i.e., willing to be exploited by the native capitalist class). This latter point is the most enlightening, as it becomes clear that what separates the “good” from the “bad” migrants is their ability to contribute to the domestic economy. “Bad” migrants might be found sitting around, living off the dole. “Good” migrants work hard (for low wages), learn the language and assimilate to the culture of the country they’ve come to. To the liberals, immigration is something to be welcomed, because it is something to be profited off of in specific conditions of economic growth. Let us ignore for now the change in attitude we see among liberals when the profit rates dry up.

To be clear, Common Sense is in this instance, as in every other, a synonym for profitable. This is clearly a preferable approach to the outright pogroms of the aforementioned fascist groups, but Adam Hanieh warns us against such an attitude by stating that

...such arguments in defence of migration frequently reinforce the implicit categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving’ migrants, with a balance sheet ultimately measured in relation to an ill-defined national good. The bogey of the ‘good’ migrant versus the ‘bad’ emerges, and the policy challenge becomes one of managing, identifying, and filtering the movement of people across borders in accordance with the needs of the national economy.⁷

Ah yes, the national economy, that thing that sits in isolation in an economic vacuum, with no connections to the rest of the world at all. The modern ideology of immigration politics uses this methodological nationalism as its starting point. To offer a correction, we’ll simply say there

7. Adam Hanieh (2019). *The Contradictions of Global Migration*, Socialist Register.

is no here (good culture, hard working) as counterposed to there (bad culture, lazy workers). The modern economy is a truly global one, with supply chains that bring commodities together to be assembled into even more commodities and logistics chains that stretch thousands of miles and cross many borders. This includes the proletariat, who does not travel thousands of miles itself, losing many of its numbers in the dangerous process of immigration simply because it feels like it. We flee war and we go where there is work, because without a wage we cannot survive. But it is not this simple.

To Hanieh, “...borders act as filters, mediating the concrete ways that classes come into being.”⁸ It therefore does not make sense to ascribe a complete hatred of immigrants to one sector of the ruling class and a fetishizing of immigrants to another (though no doubt, certain of these bigotries are widespread among the individuals of the ruling class). Borders are designed in all nations to be dynamic and ever-responsive to the needs of capital. At times, when profit rates are high and industry is booming, certain national economies will need a larger labor pool, and this will manifest itself as a kind of liberal welcoming of any and all immigrants who want to come “here” to build their nation together.⁹

The United States, for example, was founded as a series of colonies that, like Australia, required a massive labor pool to be profitable (due in part to the genocides attendant to the settler project). The ideology that grew from there was, symbolically at least, the Statue of Liberty, with her welcoming gaze to all the huddled masses of over-crowded Europe making their way across the Atlantic (the fact that that this also included

8. Ibid.

9. To be quite abstract and gloss over a number of concrete differences in the major parties, most modern nations have two types of parties. There are the liberal ones and the conservative ones. The liberal ones tend to be more methodical and structured (in theory) than their conservative counterparts. They are less willing to rock the boat. They maintain the status quo of exploitation by any means necessary. The conservative parties, ironically, are more willing to upset this balance. They represent industries that require harsher treatment of the working class, our ecology and even the “rules based international order”. When we see profitability grind to a halt and imperialism at loggerheads, the conservatives win support from the bourgeoisie by promising to step in and do something batshit, like threaten to annex Sudetenland or Greenland.

a large number of indentured servants, prisoners and, of course, slaves, serves only to show that when traditional immigration cannot meet the needs of capital, it simply will find other ways of sourcing labor).

But industries cannot stay booming for long. The race across industries to be the most efficient and save on labor time that in part comes to define capitalism, sees capital seek new opportunities for investment overseas. The outdated factories of the Rust Belt, for example, are driven out of business by more capital intensive and efficient industries in East Asia, and the proles of Pittsburgh or Gary are left scratching their heads. Capital looks for offshoring opportunities as a way to seek out lower wages and new investment opportunities. Suddenly in the imperial core, manufacturing jobs disappeared, and the states sought to develop industries that could support the higher wage costs left over domestically. My story, for example, is a common one among my millennial, American peers. My great grandparents were farmers, my grandparents soldiers, factory workers and homemakers, my parents, aunts and uncles became service workers, and I'm a pencil pushing administrator whose job only exists as legal CYA for my employing entity.

To Editorial Conatus, writing in a recent piece for Heatwave Magazine, today "...deindustrialization does not free up time or redistribute wealth. It dismantles stable jobs, degrades working conditions, and throws millions into precarious forms of subsistence: underemployment, gig economy, forced migration or illicit economies."¹⁰ Far from the liberal (and, admittedly, at times socialist) promise of automation freeing up our time, it comes to represent a massive crisis which threatens the mode of production that produced it in the first place.

But there are some jobs and industries that cannot be spatially abstracted in the same way a factory can just be plopped more or less anywhere. These are the jobs that cannot be automated, and that you probably have a very specific idea in your head of what the people who frequently do them in your country look and sound like. These are jobs bound to a specific place, like construction, agriculture, healthcare services, trans-
10. Editorial Conatus (2025). Proletarian Report on the Burned Periphery: Mexico in the Global Management of the Surplus. Heatwave Magazine.

portation and delivery work.

And this brings us back to Hanieh's metaphor of borders as filters. Confronted with the problem of being unable to lower wages by sending these jobs to countries where labor power is cheaper, capital creates differential citizenship rights as a method of creating and maintaining precarity among certain segments of the proletariat. It is this precarity that allows for hyperexploitation by the employing capitalists, as the proles employed in these industries frequently are paid less than their "native" counterparts and afforded fewer rights in their workplaces, because, in the eyes of the state, they aren't full citizens and thus aren't given full protection. The threat of deportation hangs over all of this as well, as we saw in the beginning of Trump II, ICE raids targeted workplace organizers and union leaders in some of their earliest raids.¹¹

Frequently, capital will also temporarily source precarious workers from outside its own borders. This was the case with the Bracero program of the 20th century which saw workers from Mexico given temporary, low-wage contracts to harvest crops in the US before their eventual deportation back to Mexico. This was the thinking behind much of the freedom of movement in the EU, which sees petty capitalists in the wealthier states employ workers from the poorer states both within and beyond the borders of the EU on low wages, and is also the case in the Gulf States and its particularly stunning immigration practices.¹²

More and more, we are seeing these policies play out on an international level. When the political classes of the global north meet in London to force Syria and Jordan to "warehouse" potential immigrant populations in internment camps, or when the United States uses its economic and political weight to force states like Mexico to act as a frontier for policing migrants before they get to the US border, we see a very strange reality. A reality where the international hierarchy of capitalist states attempt to navigate a time of perhaps terminal economic crisis. The simple reality is that the reserve army of labor, that segment of the pro-

11. Ben Casselman (2025). "Arrest of Union Leader Highlights Link Between Workers' and Immigrants' Rights", The New York Times.

12. Adam Hanieh (2019). The Contradictions of Global Migration, Socialist Register.

letariat that Marx recognized as necessary for the dynamic needs of capital, ever-shifting between employment and un- or under-employment, has ballooned to a point we have not seen before. Capital simply requires fewer workers in relative terms than ever before. Much of the global population becomes superfluous to capital; a problem to be managed, with the employed workers of the core states fighting harder than ever to avoid becoming superfluous themselves.

This stratification of the proletariat is given ideological cover through the demonizing of the immigrant. It is not particularly hard to see how this happens. The ruling political parties in every country in the imperial core have two bases: their voting base, and their real base. The voting base is who they appeal to quantitatively to get the votes they need to be elected. Their real base is who they govern for, and often includes a loose coalition of capitalists both large and small, often with competing interests. Their real base gives the ruling parties information on what levels of precarity are required in any given industry at any given time. The parties take this information and use it to craft domestic and international policy, but they must also sell these policies to their voting base. They do this through appeals to “national interest” in the best of times, and racist fearmongering and violent roundups, deportations and killings in the worst.

But unfortunately, this is not the end of the story, because it would be in very bad faith to pretend that workers in the imperial core specifically do not also have a material interest in this hyperexploitation. When a proletarian Trump supporter leaves an America First rally where Mexicans are likened to animals and stops on the way home for a burrito, this is not cognitive dissonance. To perhaps be a bit flippant, there is nothing dissonant to these people about supporting ICE, cheering them on when they kill another prole and being served cheap food by a fellow prole that they see as beneath them, both culturally and economically. It all fits into a hierarchy which is sold to certain proles as natural. It’s a hierarchy that allows these proles to justify their own decaying place in society by reasoning that it could be worse, at least they’re able to survive a little better due to the worse lives their fellow proles live beneath them, allowing for

cheaper services and commodities, as well as a moral smugness at being part of the “superior culture”.

None other than Marx, seeing the hatred native English workers had in his time for the immigrant Irish population, knew that “the average English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him.”¹³ There was nothing inherent in the temperament of people born in Ireland that the English found disagreeable, obviously. What they found disagreeable was the very real issue of the ruling class using precarious immigrants from Ireland to undercut their own wages.

Marx also was able to see that this cleaving of proletarian interests operated then as now on an international level as well, and was (is) one of the major barriers to an international socialist movement.

This antagonism is reproduced also on the other side of the Atlantic. The Irish, driven from their native soil by the oxen and the sheep, reassemble in North America, where they constitute a conspicuous and ever-growing section of the population. Their only thought, their only passion, is hatred for England. The English and American governments (that is, the classes they represent) nourish these passions in order to perpetuate the covert struggle between the United States and England, and thereby prevent a sincere and serious alliance between the working classes on both sides of the Atlantic, and, consequently, their emancipation.¹⁴

THE CHAUVINIST LEFT

It will come as no surprise to anyone active in left circles that there are certain members of the left political scene that harbor nationalist sympathies. These attitudes fall into two categories: those operating in good faith, and those operating in bad faith.

13. Karl Marx (1870). Confidential Communication on Bakunin.

14. Ibid.

The good faith left-nationalism is more pathetic than anything else. It is simply those members of the proletarian class who, recognizing the downward pressure immigration politics places on their wages, seek to draw fellow proles to socialism by reasoning that unions and parties should defend what workers in their often core countries have by excluding migrants from organizing efforts. This attitude should be stamped out wherever it is found, quickly but sternly. There is no version of socialism that splits the proletarian class into competing camps. Either we all succeed, or we all fail. A classless society is exactly that.

More strategically, this attitude fails to plan in the long term. Let's say a successful revolution in Limerick spreads to the rest of the country, with workers all over Ireland taking control of their neighborhoods and work places, ousting the police and military, and dissolving the civil bonds that keep them operational. Well, without a series of revolutions against the ruling classes of the UK, the rest of Europe, and even, well, the rest of the world frankly, all that will happen is an international wave of repression will form to take back control of Ireland for the capitalist class. A classless society must be global, or at the very least large enough to defend itself (which any one nation cannot do).

The bad faith attitude of certain leftists on the immigration and national questions is much more perverse, and unfortunately is growing in popularity. This is a story as old as time. Certain out of touch proles will recognize the disgruntlement of other proles (almost always in the imperial core) regarding their low wages and use that as a strategic gambit. This gambit takes these at times racist attitudes and amplifies them, believing that we can build social democracy easily, we just need to stop being so damn woke and off-putting to our fellow proles. If they're racist, it's only because the capitalist class is using all these damn immigrants to ruin our social democratic (fascist) dream. Get the immigrants out and build socialism in one country.

A few things to say here. Firstly, and most obviously, none of these people promoting these ideas have any clue what a classless society would look like. It's just some bullshit about nationalizing certain sectors and

having a big state. Politically, they confuse big state Soviet style “socialism” for communal property relations, and because they do this, they’re able to see a path to socialism that more or less involves tricking proles into doing electoralism. Secondly, and I won’t harp on this point again, socialism needs to be international for practical, strategic, moral and definitional reasons. Thirdly, these people need to get off social media. The majority of the red-brown talking heads you hear about who believe in this shit are just egotistical media types chasing the algorithm. Building socialism to them is not a matter of hard work to build up our collective capacities as a class, but hard work to build a brand to get clicks. This needs to be stamped out quickly and harshly.

IT’S ALL GONNA BE FINE (right?)

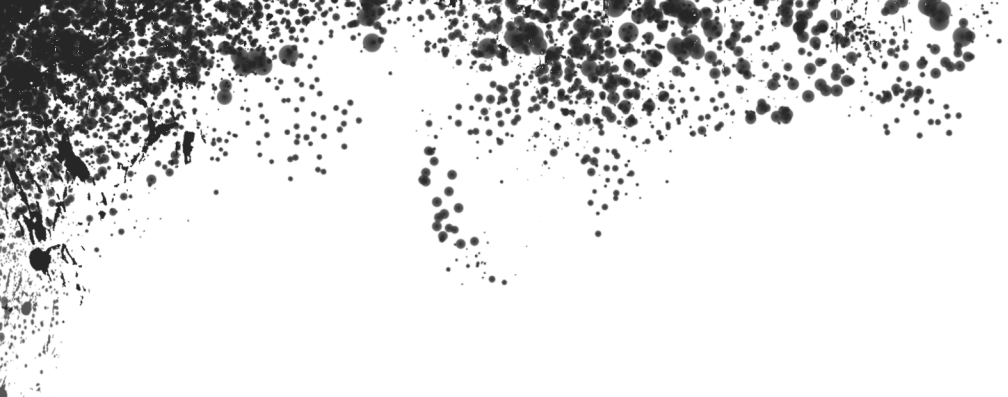
If this all seems down on our capabilities of building socialism in the present moment, well, that’s fair.

These proletarian stratifications seem insurmountable because they are all based on proles fighting for an ever-shrinking slice of the pie. Where comes more pie? Well, there really is only one answer to that, and it should be obvious. The answer is that the only way forward is to abolish class once and for all and take the entire, byzantine productive apparatus we have built into common ownership, so that it can be rationally and democratically managed.

Easier said than done.

But what we can say is that capital is, once again, showing us that it is digging its own grave. Increasing immiseration among the global population will force proles to work together to act as a class. Sooner or later, there will be very few opportunities for us to sell our labor power, and we will have to see society for what it is: a class-based system built on exploitation, exclusion and violence. Social democracy and its mirror image fascism are doomed to fail, because they both rely on opportunities for capitalist growth. Either we let the whole thing collapse in a spectacle of farce, or we finally act internationally as a class to see it replaced with a better society. Much of our ability to build this future classless society will

depend on what we are able to offer our fellow proles as agitators and organizers, both at home and abroad. We need to be able to promise something positive, and break from the cycle of protecting what we have as owners of labor power. It's only once this promise becomes material, that we can expect mass support.



AGROECOLOGY & REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

BY JACK E. & T. STEARNES

The thing about agriculture is it's the most important thing we do, and we are rapidly approaching a point where capitalist agriculture will not be able to feed the global population (if it can even be said to have ever done so in the first place).

At the same time, there's a huge amount of bad information out there regarding "sustainable" agriculture, specifically in a left-wing context. Many otherwise well-meaning lefties will nod at poorly defined systems like permaculture when discussing ecological communism. Systems like this cannot meet the needs of a globalized world, especially when we need to maintain cereal grain production as a caloric base.

One of the better approaches to sustainable agriculture is the field of agroecology, which is well-suited to systems theory and emancipatory, left-wing politics. In fact, there is a necessary and reciprocal relationship between the creation of a classless society and ecological agriculture. Many agroecological studies overlook that producing food sustainably would require communal property relations. Likewise, many communists overlook the necessity of studying agricultural systems and their potential implementation in both the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods.

With this in mind, what we'll try and do in this essay is the following:

- set a definition for what it is we mean when we talk about agriculture,
- give ourselves a baseline understanding of the problems of capitalist agriculture, including how we got to this point,
- merge a number of agroecological approaches to the subject to give us a picture of what truly ecological communist agriculture would look like, and
- use these ideas as a polestar for socialism, both in its functioning as a social system and our strategy to get there.

AGRICULTURE DEFINED

When we think of agriculture today, we might think of the proud, lone

farmer, perhaps somewhere in the American Midwest, sitting in their combine listening to Johnny Cash or some other flag waving sellout as the sun goes down on another day of good, honest work. If we're more honest with ourselves, we might picture poorly paid, immigrant laborers working half-hunched over in blistering heat to harvest strawberries and watermelons. But both portraits miss the broader reality of modern agriculture. When conceived of as a system, it's difficult to define where it begins and where it ends. What about the engineers and factory workers producing synthetic fertilizers? Or the truck drivers transporting produce to supermarket shelves or the cooks turning this produce into edible food? Where do they fit in?

If we define agriculture as simply those activities and processes that take place on farm, whether it be growing and harvesting cereal grains, fruit and vegetables, or raising livestock, we lose sight of the broader systems that "agriculture" as such relies on, and that rely on it. In order to really conceptualize sustainable agriculture, we must think systemically. Defined this way, agriculture necessarily includes pre-farm systems such as the production of seeds, fertilizers and farm equipment, as well as post-farm systems including packaging, preservation, transportation, cooking and even consumption. If we're setting as our goal an understanding what's necessary for a theory of planning for sustainable agriculture, our approach needs to take into account the series of systemic recursions that what we call "agriculture" fits into.

So where to begin with a theory of classless, sustainable agriculture?

For our purposes here, we'll define agriculture as the processes directly related to the production and consumption of food. If we were to broaden this definition, we would wind up with a sprawling essay discussing the best ways to produce energy sustainably or even the economic laws of a communist society, which, while necessary for the functioning of any sustainable, communist agricultural system, will be outside the purview of this essay.

AGRICULTURE TODAY

In the same way that an understanding of the laws of capitalist society is necessary to understand what must be superseded in communism, it's also necessary to understand capitalist agriculture in order to understand what would make communist agriculture truly sustainable.

Capitalism was considered historically progressive because it socialized production. It took a series of solitary producers with minimal connection to each other and created a global system in which production became a collective endeavor. Or, at least, that's how it's supposed to work. Capitalism operates as a series of independent firms producing competitively for the purpose of exchange. Because of this, we all rely on each other to produce what we need to survive and thrive. This socialized production, however, is in direct contradiction with its competitive nature. It is socialized, yet chaotic. Uncontrolled and out of control. This is clearly the case when it comes to capitalist agriculture, where production takes place in a highly specialized fashion with all of its parts increasingly decoupled from, and in contradiction to, each other.

This competitive, exchange-based economy ensures that, agriculturally, we produce what is profitable, not what is needed for a healthy society nor even a society that maintains its ability to continue to produce food. This is the classic exchange value vs use value contradiction at the core of capitalist society. As we'll see, applying the principles of a competitive, exchange-based economy to agriculture was initially both possible and highly profitable, thanks to a series of productivity gains. However, many of these gains relied on an appropriation of the ecological surplus - a surplus that is rapidly being depleted.

How We Got Here

The history of modern capitalist agriculture is the story of humanity's changing relationship with our broader ecology. Let's take a step back in history to understand how we arrived where we are now.

To give ourselves an abstracted view of (mainly Western) European feudalism as a coherent system, we can see that it differed from cap-

italism in that instead of placing emphasis on the productivity of labor, feudalism was more concerned with the productivity of land.¹ Those with enough political clout - lords, barons, queens, kings, etc. - extracted rents from the producing class - the peasantry - who were tied to the means of production - the farmland - in a legal relationship that bonded them to a specific place for their whole lives. The farmland the peasants occupied was legally controlled by the political rulers of a given area, and this political coercion over the producing class to give up portions of their surplus was exercised over both manorial domains held outright by the ruling class and the tracts cultivated by the peasantry.

It was this situation, peasants working land for both themselves and the ruling class, that led to the development of the highest stages of feudalism and its ultimate terminal crisis. The feudal ruling class tended to take the best tracts of farmland for themselves, and had an interest in improving the land insofar as they were always interested in maximizing harvests. Peasants, on the other hand, necessarily sought to maximize the productivity of their “own” land (to lessen the burden of the demands of the ruling classes) both through reclaiming “natural” and unworked soil and through developments in various agricultural processes. And it is because of this tension that though we tend to think of feudalism as a zero-growth static system, this was, of course, not the case. Technical developments, while nowhere close to as common as in capitalism, did take place with the adoption of iron plows, new systems for soil management such as the field rotations and, crucially, massive land reclamation projects. The ecological impact of these land reclamation projects should be obvious, and can be noted in the historical record in instances such as the slow loss of old growth forests.

This socially driven ecological crisis was at the very least partly to blame for the crisis of late feudalism. As stated by Perry Anderson,

1. Why the focus solely on Western European feudalism? Because this was the set of systems that led directly to capitalism. Other systems were perhaps headed in that direction, including feudal Japan, but for a variety of reasons they never fully adopted private property as the basis of all production. Once developed in Western Europe, capitalist production was violently exported to the rest of the world.

The deepest determinant of this general crisis probably lay, however, in a 'seizure' of the mechanisms of reproduction of the system at a barrier point of its ultimate capacities. *In particular, it seems clear that the basic motor of rural reclamation, which had driven the whole feudal economy forwards for three centuries, eventually over-reached the objective limits of both terrain and social structure.* Population continued to grow while yields fell on the marginal lands still available for conversion at the existing levels of technique, and soil deteriorated through haste or misuse. The last reserves of newly reclaimed land were usually of poor quality, wet or thin soil that was more difficult to farm, and on which inferior crops such as oats were sown. The oldest lands under plough were, on the other hand, liable to age and decline from the very antiquity of their cultivation. The advance of cereal acreage, moreover, had frequently been achieved at the cost of a diminution of grazing-ground: animal husbandry consequently suffered, and with it the supply of manure for arable farming itself. Thus the very progress of mediaeval agriculture now incurred its own penalties. Clearance of forests and wastelands had not been accompanied by comparable care in conservation: there was little application of fertilizers at the best of times, so that the top soil was often quickly exhausted; floods and dust-storms became more frequent. Moreover, the diversification of the European feudal economy with the growth of international trade had led in some regions to a decrease of corn output at the expense of other branches of agriculture (vines, flax, wool or stock-breeding), and hence to increased import dependence, and its attendant dangers.² (emphasis ours)

How then was the ability of society to reproduce itself agriculturally restored in the midst of the late-feudal crisis? As backwards as it may sound now, the answer is capitalist social relations. In the development

2. Perry Anderson (1974). *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*.

of a mode of production based on the productivity of labor, European society found a system much more suited to the rapid appropriation of ecological surpluses. To Jason W. Moore,

Modernity's law of value is an exceedingly peculiar way of organizing life. Born amid the rise of capitalism after 1450, the law of value enabled an unprecedented historical transition: from land productivity to labor productivity as the metric of wealth and power. It was an ingenious civilizational strategy, for it enabled the deployment of capitalist technics - crystalizations of tools and ideas, power and nature - to appropriate the wealth of uncommodified nature in service to advancing labor productivity.³

The ecological implications of this new set of relations was obvious immediately. Moore continues later,

The rise of capitalism after 1450 was made possible by an epochal shift in the scale, speed, and scope of landscape transformation in the Atlantic world and beyond...Feudal Europe had taken centuries to deforest large expanses of western and central Europe. After 1450, comparable deforestation occurred in decades, not centuries.⁴

Despite misconceptions of capitalism as a closed system that endlessly generates surplus through labor exploitation alone, it is structurally dependent on the continual appropriation of resources it neither reproduces nor accounts for within its own economic logic. This is most obvious in ecology, where capitalism has rapidly appropriated the "free gifts" of "nature" to fuel accumulation since its infancy. Consider fossil fuels, a non-renewable set of resources which formed over a very long period in very specific conditions several hundred million years ago. Oil, coal and natural gas jump-started capitalism via the industrial revolution and allowed staggering levels of accumulation. It remains a major question, however, whether capitalism can maintain adequate levels of accumula-

3. Jason W. Moore (2015). Capitalism in the Web of Life.

4. Ibid.

tion once these appropriated energy sources dry up. The same applies to capitalism's shifting relationship with reproductive labor over its history. Very early on, the cost of sustaining and reproducing the working class was covered in part by the state. At times, however, the state refuses to pay the full cost of social reproduction and simply allows proles to die faster than they reproduce. This was especially the case when Engels did his famous survey of the working class in England, finding poverty and suffering on a staggering scale in what was the most developed capitalist nation on earth.

Capitalists continually seek anything that will give them an advantage over their rivals. Aside from the classic economic way in which capitalists find this edge (the development of the productivity of labor), they will also “cheat” the system to push costs into other spheres. To Moore, this takes the form of what he calls the “Four Cheaps”, and it shows the intersection of the pure economic logic of capitalism, ecology and feminism.

The substance of value is socially necessary labor-time. The drive to advance labor productivity is fundamental to competitive fitness. This means that the exploitation of commodified labor-power is central to capital accumulation, and to the survival of individual capitalists. But this cannot be the end of the story. For the relations necessary to accumulate abstract social labor are—necessarily—more expansive, in scale, scope, speed, and intensity. Capital must not only ceaselessly accumulate and revolutionize commodity production; it must ceaselessly search for, and find ways to produce, Cheap Natures: a rising stream of low-cost food, labor-power, energy, and raw materials to the factory gates (or office doors, or...). These are the Four Cheaps. The law of value in capitalism is a law of Cheap Nature.⁵

In the case of agriculture, capitalism has been saved time and

5. Ibid.

time again by its ability to produce cheap food. Cheap food, as defined by Moore, simply means more calories for less average labor-time. The incredibly fertile natural soils of the colonized American continents produced calories with few inputs once the free gifts of the European continent dried up. But this did not last particularly long, and faced with the loss of naturally rich soils, capitalism has been forced to artificially prop up soil and agricultural productivity in a number of ways. This brings us to the modern capitalist agricultural model we are all unfortunately familiar with. The next several sections will explore the ways in which this new agriculture functions, and why it is thoroughly unsustainable.

Why Capital Avoids Farms and Invests in Agriculture

It's no secret that modern farming is a heavily subsidized industry. Subsidies to farmers tend to come in several forms, whether they be counter-cyclical payments, direct payments, disaster relief, or loans. The necessity for capitalist states to prop up some of the most vital sectors of the global economy should tell us something about capitalism. Indeed, what it tells us is that farming is not a particularly profitable sector of agriculture and all the appropriative tricks capital has pulled to try and make it a profitable sector are coming back around to potentially put the whole agricultural sector at risk of collapse.

To begin with, on-farm processes make up a small chunk of the total profitability of the agricultural sector. According to Lewontin and Levins,

The most striking change in the nature of agricultural production in the United States since the turn of the century is in the composition of inputs - the seed, fertilizer, energy, water, land and labor - used by the farmer in production...

The total value of inputs into farming rose from an index value of 85 in 1910 to about 100 in 1975 (1967 = 100), which is not a very great increase, but the nature of these inputs changed drastically. Inputs produced on the farm itself went from an index value of 175 down to 90 between 1910 and 1975, while the index value of in-

puts purchased from outside the farm rose from 38 to 105. That is, farmers used to grow their own seed, raise their own horses and mules, raise the hay the livestock ate, and spread manure from these animals on the land. Now farmers buy their seed from Pioneer Hybrid Seed Company, their “mules” from Ford Motor Company, the “hay” to feed those “mules” from Exxon, and the “manure” from Union Carbide. *Thus farming has changed from a productive process, which originated most of its own inputs and converted them into outputs, to a process that passes materials and energy through from an external supplier to an external buyer.*⁶ (emphasis our own)

They continue,

At present, only 10 percent of the value added in agriculture is actually added on the farm. About 40 percent of the value is added in creating inputs (fertilizer, machinery, seeds, hired labor, fuel, pesticides), after the farm commodities leave the farm gate. Another facet of this structure is that, although the percent of the labor force engaged in farming has dropped from 40 percent in 1900 to 4 percent in 1975...the number of those who supply, service, transport, transform, and produce farm inputs and farm outputs has grown; for every person working on the farm, there are now about six persons engaged in off-farm agricultural work. To sum up, *farm production is now only a small fraction of agricultural production.*⁷ (emphasis the author's)

The point being that large scale capital flows into off-farm agricultural production and distribution, leaving the actual farming to petty capitalists constantly searching for cheap labor, cheap inputs and cheap solutions at the expense of workers and our ecology.

6. Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin (1985). *The Dialectical Biologist*.

7. *Ibid.*

A concrete example of this system's instability can be seen in the centralization of capital in capitalist agriculture around these off-farm sectors. Some of the largest names in the agricultural industry are the multinational giants collectively referred to as ABCD (Archer-Daniels-Midland, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus). These four corporations are primarily concerned not with crop production, but with commodity trading and food processing. They control roughly 70% of the global grain trade, have heavy stakes in palm oil trading and manufacturing as well as monopolies on various oilseed interests.⁸ However, they operate on razor-thin margins. As shown below, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, saw global grain prices skyrocket, before crashing again in 2024 (nothing like a bit of good old fashioned war-profiteering).⁹ During this crash, ADM and Bunge reported steep declines in their annual profits, down 48% and 49%, respectively. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, these war-driven price shocks took place with little regard for the real production and reserves of grain, which remained abundant throughout the market turmoil.¹⁰

While all of these corporations do own large tracts of land for direct crop production (Cargill, for example, owns two large palm plantations in Indonesia which account for 11% of the total value of the country's palm oil exports), the preferred model remains to avoid labor intensive on-farm agricultural processes, buying the products for processing and trading only after they have been harvested, pushing the high labor costs associated with crop production onto smallholding farmers.¹¹

The lot of the smallholder in capitalism is a poor one, let's not get it confused, but like all petty capitalists, they too are prone to reactionary practices in regards to labor and ecology. To Marx, the petty bourgeoisie was "...a transition class, in which the interests of two classes are simul-

8. Sophia Murphy, David Burch and Jennifer Clapp (2012). "Cereal Secrets: The world's largest commodity traders and global trends in agriculture", Oxfam Reports.

9. Susannah Savage (2025). "ABCD' agricultural traders struggle to escape boom-bust cycle", Financial Times

10. Pat Mooney (2022). "The grain giants have made a bonanza from hunger. Time to take them apart", openDemocracy.

11. Sophia Murphy, David Burch and Jennifer Clapp (2012). "Cereal Secrets: The world's largest commodity traders and global trends in agriculture", Oxfam Reports.

Ag traders benefited from rising prices after the Russian invasion, but the windfall was short lived

Share prices and index rebased

— ADM — Bunge — FAO Cereal price index



Sources: LSEG, FAO

taneously mutually blunted.”¹² They protest the power of the large agricultural corporations, on whom they depend to buy their inputs and, in many cases, sell their outputs, while they simultaneously exploit cheap, often immigrant, labor and pollute their local environment using pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

The search for efficiency in agriculture on both the large and small scale of capital has led to increasingly self-defeating practices. In many cases, seeds such as hybrid maize are engineered by large agricultural firms to produce exceptionally high yields, but the resulting crops are often intentionally incapable of producing viable seeds for future planting. Thus, every year farmers have to return to the company selling these seeds, instead of saving a small percentage of the harvest to plant the following season. Anyone who has a small garden and grows their plants from seed will be familiar with this process and will recognize the F1 label on most seed packets. F1 seeds are hybrids, made by crossing two seed lines to produce a plant with traits desirable to the average gardener - disease resistance, uniformity, picture perfect tomatoes, etc. However, because the plant is a hybrid (just like the maize grown by small farmers), if you save the seeds, they will either not grow at all or become a different plant than you originally grew, as the F1 seed you brought was produced by crossing

12. Karl Marx (1854). *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

two lines of parent plants. This is a microcosm of the larger agricultural industry, and why, if you can, you should grow heirloom crops, as they “grow true” and you can save the seeds for the next year.

Of course, the massive investment in off-farm agricultural industries was not the lone idea of some enlightened group of entrepreneurial capitalists. Chemical production, for example, ramped up massively in the United States via mass state spending during WWII, and afterwards, chemical manufacturers suddenly had a large amount of state of the art fixed capital at their disposal and utilized this with great effect in the production of synthetic fertilizers (discussed more in the next section) and pesticides.

Pesticides such as herbicides, fungicides and insecticides make up a large part of the modern agricultural system. They promise to raise productivity but have detrimental secondary effects, all of which are growing in consequence. They can be carcinogenic and have a tendency to seep into the water table and thus our water supply. There is simply no safe level of exposure to these chemicals - for the average person or for the farm laborers using them. Herbicides specifically are rapidly losing effectiveness, as “superweeds” outpace capitalist scientists who continually develop new chemicals to poison their fields only for the weeds to evolve resistance and continue to outcompete crops.

Post-WWII there was also another massive increase in on-farm labor productivity due in part to the rise of mechanization of certain planting and harvesting techniques. Partnered with the usage of hybrid seeds, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, this new mechanization led to the advance of the petrochemical complex at the heart of modern agriculture.

All of this is to say that despite its historically unparalleled efficiency, this new system of agriculture based on a divide between on-farm and off-farm agricultural processes, as well as cheap chemical inputs, cheap energy and cheap labor, has run up against natural limits. Crucially, it has tested the limits of labor efficiency. According to Frank Bardacke,

Agriculture remains dependent on natural cycles and rhythms. Agribusiness cannot escape the seasons, unpredictable changes in the climate, and the natural tempo of individual plants, which do not mature at the same rate. It cannot escape mysterious differences in seed performance, or the interactions between water, sun, and soil, all of which make it relatively hard to mechanize agriculture, and virtually impossible to convert it into a kind of deskilled manufacturing process...

Each failed attempt has its own story. The strawberry machine bruised the berries. The asparagus machine couldn't cut the shoots without destroying the ability of the bulb to generate more shoots for a later harvest. The celery machine couldn't cut the stalks cleanly enough to be suitable for the fresh market. The lemon tree shaker produced three to seven times as much unmarketable fruit as did hand picking. Most other tree shakers do too much damage to the tree roots, although many nut trees can withstand the shaking. The one great mechanical success is the contraption that picks canning tomatoes, which, combined with a reengineered tomato, did replace thousands of workers. Otherwise, fresh tomatoes, like most other fruits and vegetables, are harvested by proficient workers making judgments and wielding tools.¹³

On-farm labor efficiency can only be pushed so far; machines for harvesting are only practical with specific crops, pesticides do not increase yields so much as protect already existing yields and soil health can only be pushed so far. What this means is that agriculture is fundamentally incompatible with the capitalist mode of production, both in a strict economic sense and an ecological one. As we will attempt to show in a later section, it is only in a classless society based on rational planning, free from the law of value, that solutions to these problems can be adequately addressed. But before we get to that, we need to take one last stop on our tour of capitalist agriculture to discuss one of the most important

13. Frank Bardacke (2011). *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*.

inputs to the agricultural process - synthetic fertilizers - to see the effect they have on the basis of all our lives, the soil.

The Nitrogen Cycle and Soil Erosion

One of the most important nutrients for plant life is nitrogen. It is one of the three primary nutrients used in synthetic fertilizers today, the others being phosphorus and potassium. Other nutrients such as sulfur, magnesium, and calcium are considered secondary inputs.

Nitrogen fertilizers use ammonia (NH_3 , a compound of nitrogen and hydrogen) as their starting point. Despite having a wide variety of industrial applications, over 70% of ammonia produced today is used to make synthetic fertilizers. The process of making ammonia is incredibly energy intensive, accounting for roughly 2% of total global energy consumption and 1.3% of CO_2 emissions from the energy production system.¹⁴

With so much nitrogen in the air around us (roughly 78% of total atmospheric composition), it would seem odd that it's necessary to produce nitrogen fertilizers to this degree, but atmospheric nitrogen cannot be used by crops in its raw form as N_2 . The natural process of converting this nitrogen into a useful form makes up part of the nitrogen cycle, whereby microbes in the soil form symbiotic relationships with certain plants to convert this atmospheric nitrogen into nitrates, nitrites and ammonia. Plants are able to easily absorb these forms of nitrogen, and certain species such as legumes have evolved to grow small nodules on their roots which act as habitats for these nitrogen fixing bacteria.

This all happens naturally, but only in healthy soil. Healthy soil maintains a rich balance of microbiotic life (bacteria, fungi, etc.) in an organic strata capable of supporting plant life. This delicate web of life is destroyed through over-tilling, over-grazing, a lack of crop variety and reliance on synthetic fertilizers.

Maintaining healthy soil is a process too labor and time intensive

14. "Ammonia Technology Roadmap: Towards more sustainable nitrogen fertiliser production" (2021). International Energy Agency.

for capital to wait around for, so it's much more profitable and efficient for capitalists to just pump dying soil full of synthetic fertilizers to mimic the outcomes of naturally healthy soil. The process of the degradation of healthy topsoils due to the loss of organic matter and nutrients, as well as the accumulation of pollutants, is called soil erosion, and it is one of the biggest problems we will face in our generation of capitalism. According to the UN,

Around 30% of the world's soils are moderately to highly degraded. Forty percent of these degraded soils are located in Africa and most of the rest are in areas that are afflicted by poverty and food insecurity. It is estimated that at least 60% of the soils of the EU are affected by one or more degradational process.

Most future land degradation is predicted to occur in the areas with the largest amount of arable land remaining. If current trends continue, experts estimate that by 2050, more than 90% of the Earth's land areas will be substantially degraded, 4 billion people will live in drylands, 50–700 million people will be forced to migrate, and global crop yields will be reduced by an average of 10% and up to 50% in some regions.¹⁵

THE AGRICULTURE OF TOMORROW

If the proletariat thought it had enough on its hands with its historic mission to overthrow class society once and for all, well too bad, because it's also going to have to figure out a way to produce and distribute enough food to keep the revolution going, before beginning a radical ecological overhaul of the entire agricultural megasystem. To push this movement forward an infinitesimally small amount, we will outline key considerations for socialist agriculture to ensure its long-term sustainability as a system.

Socialist Agriculture Defined

The model we're going to put forward here for a socialist agriculture owes

15. "Soil Degradation" (2024). United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

heavily to the field of study known as agroecology. Instead of being a step-by-step guide of How To Do Sustainable Agriculture TODAY Or Your Money Back!™, agroecology is a conceptual framework for viewing agricultural systems as ecological systems. Which, when you put it like that, they obviously are. Many sustainable agricultural models, however, are what we might call environmental as opposed to ecological. What's the difference? To Murray Bookchin, environmentalism designates

...a mechanistic, instrumental outlook that sees nature as a passive habitat composed of "objects" such as animals, plants, minerals, and the like that must merely be rendered more serviceable for human use... Environmentalism tends to reduce nature to a storage bin of "natural resources" or "raw materials." Within this context, very little of a social nature is spared from the environmentalist's vocabulary: cities become "urban resources" and their inhabitants "human resources." If the word resources leaps out so frequently from environmentalistic discussions of nature, cities, and people, an issue more important than mere word play is at stake. *Environmentalism...tends to view the ecological project for attaining a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature as a truce rather than a lasting equilibrium.* The "harmony" of the environmentalist centers around the development of new techniques for plundering the natural world with minimal disruption of the human "habitat." Environmentalism does not question the most basic premise of the present society, notably, that humanity must dominate nature; rather, it seeks to facilitate that notion by developing techniques for diminishing the hazards caused by the reckless despoliation of the environment.¹⁶ (emphasis our own)

Put like this, the vast majority of the capitalist class could be called environmentalists. They seek greener ways to appropriate the "free gifts" of nature. More efficient ways of subjugating the natural world to capi-

tal. Ecology, on the other hand, begins by understanding that there is no natural system that we stand outside of. The labor process is a process of nature, and, viewed systemically, must see itself as such if the full implications of every change we make to the world around us are ever going to be accounted for.

So what does that mean for agriculture? It begins by understanding that agricultural systems are nested within broader ecological ones. It means that encouraging the variety of our local ecology (number of pollinators and pollinator friendly native plants, the extent of natural ecosystems like forests, kelp beds, meadowlands, and so on) is important for both moral *and* practical reasons. As we've seen in our brief tour of capitalist agriculture, privileging the "human" over the "natural" has led to a rapid decline in either set of systems to be able to support themselves. For our socialist agricultural systems to function, they need to work in tandem with the ecological systems they are embedded within, instead of simply abstracting away crucial differences in local ecology. This will have implications for not only the way we produce food, but how we live as well.

But crucially, all this does *not* mean letting every landscape and city revert to its "natural" state and making everyone become an-prim foragers. To reiterate, humans are just as much a part of the natural world as kangaroos or spruce trees, and so are our laboring activities. What is needed then, is less a project focused solely on minimizing our impact on the world, and more an approach aimed at understanding the myriad ways our actions interact with the web of relations in our ecology.

Agroecology in Practice

With all of that in mind, let's begin taking a look at how this would concretely change our on- and off-farm practices.

Although agroecology is a conceptual framework, its ecological dictums can be teased out in a number of ways to find concrete rules for agriculture. For example, the paper *An Agroecological Europe in 2050: Multifunctional Agriculture for Healthy Eating* by Xavier Poux and Pierre-Marie Aubert (shortened hereafter to TYFA, for the Ten Years For Agroecology modelling exercise) lists several principles that "guide re-

searchers, practitioners and social actors in the field of agroecology.” They are,

- Recycling biomass, optimising and closing nutrient cycles
- Improving soil condition, especially its organic matter content and biological activity
- Reducing dependence on external synthetic inputs
- Minimising resource losses (solar radiation, soil, water, air) by managing the micro-climate, increasing soil cover, harvesting rainwater, etc.
- Enhancing and preserving the genetic diversity of crops and livestock
- Strengthening positive interactions between the different elements of agro-ecosystems, by (re-)connecting crop and livestock production, designing agroforestry systems, using push-and-pull strategies for pest control
- Integrating biodiversity protection as an element of food production
- Integrating short- and long-term considerations into decision making
- Aiming for optimum yields rather than maximum yields
- Promoting value and adaptability¹⁷

Again, these principles are stated by Poux, Aubert and their researchers as being situational for several reasons. Firstly, as stated before, the only real dictum of agroecology is to treat agricultural systems as ecological systems. Everything listed above is secondary to that. Secondly, when we begin to get into the specifics of applying these principles, it will be clear that these are meant for European climates, which is to say, predominantly temperate climates. The paper in question is written directly for European policymakers and farmers. A number of their principles can be applied to, say, a tropical agricultural system, but the specificities of those systems (reliance on rainy seasons, extended daylight hours, less temperature variance, lack of frost, etc.) will require a different concrete

17. Xavier Poux and Pierre-Marie Aubert (2018). “An agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating: Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise”.

approach to farming techniques. But as stated previously, the abstract principles of agroecology still apply.

Transitioning Away From Synthetic Inputs

As stated in the TYFA model, one of the main ways in which ecological agriculture will be achieved will be by slashing our reliance on inputs such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. To the greatest extent possible, we need farms to either produce their own inputs or find a way to produce agricultural outputs without them. We have seen the impact these inputs have on the supply chain, the farm and the environment, but it is clear that in capitalist agriculture, they are necessary.

So how can we do without them?

The answer lies in understanding why these inputs are so necessary to capitalist agriculture. Capitalist agriculture is based on concentration and mass intensification of the farming processes. Efficiency at all costs. When a local environment is given over entirely to, say, soybean or maize production, the ability of the “natural” system to protect itself against imbalances of pests or unwanted fungal outbreaks is massively curtailed. When it comes to pesticides, a nuanced approach will be needed to deal with pests and fungal disease outbreaks without resorting to mass poisonings. This approach will be specific to the crops being grown and the environment they are being grown in. But as a rule, healthy soil, with its high variety of microbes, fungal networks and organic material, protects against fungal infections in crops and harmful microbial or pest imbalances in the soil by maintaining a complex balance of life. Beneficial insects such as certain types of wasps can also be encouraged in agroecological landscapes to balance insects currently considered pests either by hunting them or competing with them. Leaving space for “non-agricultural” ecological infrastructure networks to encourage these species will be vital.

Likewise, doing without herbicides is relatively simple; it requires higher labor inputs to weed and maintain healthy beds. This is a key element of truly sustainable agriculture, and is why such a system remains

unattainable under capitalism. Envisioning a decline in labor productivity across an entire sector is only plausible within the context of a planned society. Capitalism functions without true planning because producers are constrained by the law of value, which compels them to produce as efficiently as possible. Anyone who forgoes the law eventually will go out of business.

So on one hand, we know that only a classless society can deliver global food security, but on the other, we can see that the age-old promise of communism - a massively efficient society where we all work as little as possible - is actually at odds with producing food ecologically. If we want to produce food in an agroecological fashion, labor inputs will have to rise, not fall. Any functioning political economy for communism will have to take this into account. Speaking philosophically, we believe that this will actually help hasten the onset of high communism - that state of affairs defined by Marx when "...the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!"¹⁸ Capitalism has a way of obscuring what it is that we all are doing when we get up and go to work in the morning. Namely, that we are collectively reproducing society together. It does this through a mix of competition between workers, indirectly social labor, commodity fetishism and production for exchange. Under communism, however, it will be immediately apparent that the work you undertake contributes to a society that you recognize and had a hand in designing. There is no more fulfilling work in this sense than agricultural labor which, though it can be a massive pain in the ass at times, makes it directly clear how the labor process interacts with our broader ecology to facilitate the flourishing of human society.

This takes us (in a roundabout way) to synthetic fertilizers, which is a much more complicated problem. In the early stages of the transition to agroecological communism, we will simply have to do with as little of these fertilizers as possible, with the aim of completely doing away with them after a period of adjustment.¹⁹ There are a number of ways in which

18. Karl Marx (1875). Critique of the Gotha Program.

19 Nitrogen fertilizers will need to be used as a stand-by for as long as it takes society to develop meaningful processes for closing the nitrogen loop in agriculture.

these inputs can be minimized. To begin, we must first recognize that when we talk about growing healthy crops, what we are primarily talking about is maintaining healthy soil. So firstly, we must consider no-till and permanent bed systems for many types of non-cereal crops. Capitalist fields are massively over-tilled. This is because it is easiest and cheapest to simply dig organic material such as manure into the soil with heavy machinery to make it break down faster. This tilling breaks up the complex webs of life within the soil that sustain crops throughout their lifecycles. Healthy, beneficial fungal networks and other microbial life are incredibly fragile, and any disturbance to them can be harmful to their ability to symbiotically grow with crops. No-till or minimal till farming practices get around this problem by consistently feeding the soil with a layer of organic material (usually compost and manure) over the top of the soil before planting directly into this top layer. This preserves the thriving life of the soil which in turn creates a healthy basis of nutrients for the crops to grow.

Additionally, when fields lay fallow, the web of life of the soil does not thrive nearly as much as when a healthy cropping system is in place. Weather such as rain and wind can also lead to a loss of topsoil and nutrients when nothing is growing. To combat this, beneficial cover crops can be used to stop soil erosion and actually encourage healthier soil by maintaining the nitrogen cycle, sequestering CO₂ and keeping the structure of the soil in place to avoid topsoil loss. Legumes, for example, are excellent at fixing nitrogen, and a number of different varieties exist that can be grown alongside other crops as part of intercropping systems or consumed in their own right.

This type of farming (and specifically this type of soil maintenance) can be compared to the concept of black boxing in systems theory. There are entirely too many different forms of life that are constantly changing and interacting in just a single small bed of soil to ever truly map out their relationships to the crops being grown. What is needed, then, is a system of best practices where we measure inputs to the soil Fertilizers for elements such as phosphorus, however, are a different story. While much can be done to avoid the soil leaching its phosphorus content, it may be that an amount of phosphorus mining will always be necessary. At this stage, it is difficult to say.

and what our results from each practice, constantly encouraging the web of life by replacing the organic substrate of the soil with decayed matter in the form of compost and manure. Clearly, however, different plants require different soil states, as requirements for PH level, water retention, nutrition levels, etc. will vary between each crop.

The issue with no or minimal till farming then becomes the need for large amounts of this compost and manure and, in an age where livestock rearing and crop production has been nearly completely decoupled, this can be quite hard to do. To make this change work, we would need large scale composting facilities that recycle food waste and agricultural detritus back into the agroecological system. In terms of manure, it would be necessary to reintroduce livestock into the crop production process. Poultry should be raised locally to crop production, and these birds could not only provide much needed manure for the farms but also consume unwanted pests in some fields (depending on the crops). But a major source of manure in this system would necessarily come from cattle and other ruminants, which brings us to the question many so-called “sustainable agricultural systems” fail to adequately answer: how can we maintain large scale cereal production without eroding our soils?

Diversification of Cropping Systems

Cereal production yields have grown very quickly under capitalism, specifically in the last century as the previously described systems of mechanization and intensification have led to a boom in productivity. Now, however, the overall productivity of grain farming has stagnated, as farmers are facing the realities of soil erosion, pesticide resistance and pollution.

Any serious ecological agricultural model will include some level of plant diversification in its cropping systems. Diversification has wide ranging benefits specific to the crops grown, but general advantages include encouraging symbiotic relationships among species, healthier soil and pest management. We briefly touched on cover cropping systems and the ability for some of these plants to be grown alongside other crops to encourage nitrogen fixation and avoid soil erosion, but ley farming takes this idea further. The basic idea behind ley systems is getting rid of per-

manent pastures for ruminants like cattle in favor of temporary pastures that are integrated into cropping systems. These temporary pastures are made up of ecologically beneficial local variants of grasses, legumes and certain types of forbs,²⁰ which both encourage high levels of biodiversity and promote healthy soil underfoot (or underhoof). Introducing these diverse pastures into crop rotations helps manage pests as, according to a study in the journal *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*,

...diversification is a key component of agroecological pest management. Diversification in time allows farmers to alternate (i) host and non-host crop species, thus reducing pest survival, and (ii) growing seasons, potentially exposing pests to unfavorable growth conditions. Diversification in space allows farmers to alternate host and non-host crop species within a field, thus reducing pests' ability to find suitable hosts or environments.²¹

Sheep or goats can also follow cattle in the field rotations to further disrupt parasite cycles. Additionally, the manure created in the process of raising livestock is obviously beneficial to the cropping systems. To the greatest extent possible, these systems will close nutrient loops, recycling not just animal waste but crop detritus to sequester carbon and save the nutrients for later crops through types of composting.

This gets us to a crucial distinction between the types of livestock raised: ruminants and monogastrics. Ruminants are animals like cattle and sheep who, due to their ability to ferment plant matter in their specialized digestive tracts with multiple stomachs, are able to live off simple plant matter like grasses. The term monogastric is a bit of a catch all, but it refers to animals like humans, pigs and poultry who have one stomach and are unable to draw the necessary nutrients from, say, grasses, the way

20. Forbs are simply broadleaf, herbaceous plants. They differ from grasses in that their roots tend to be deeper than the shallow roots of grasses, and are thus able to pull nutrients from deeper in the soil. A mix of grasses and forbs that are edible to livestock are thus mutually beneficial to the livestock and the ecology of the meadowlands.

21. Guillaume Martin, et al. (2020). "Role of ley pastures in tomorrow's cropping systems. A review", *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*.

ruminants do. Because of this, monogastric livestock require feed from other sources, namely cereals and oilseeds, which puts them in direct competition for food with humans. But capitalism loves these animals because some of them are easily adapted to efficient, intensive production. The lives of chickens, for example, are easily adapted to the factory system - they're kept in crowded indoor environments with several thousand to a barn, they can be selectively bred to encourage rapid growth and they can be fed cheap feed, slaughtered and processed with mechanical ease. This is done always with the aim of cutting down the turnaround time for a filet or a thigh, and "...transforming poultry raising into a streamlined industrial process more closely resembling chemical manufacture than traditional agriculture."²² The implications of these factory farming techniques - ranging from the diminished quality of poultry, to the short, terrible lives of the birds, to the heavy use of chemical inputs and, of course, the creation of ideal conditions for the incubation of pandemics - are all secondary to profitability.

The suitability of certain types of these monogastrics to capitalist production means that more and more land has been given over to the production of cereals and oilseeds to feed these animals, and not humans. According to the TYFA model, 60% of cereals and 70% of oilseeds available in the European continent are used to feed livestock. What this implies is that utilizing the abilities of ruminants to enhance the biodiversity of temporary and (to a lesser degree) permanent grasslands is much more valid and useful in an agroecological system than raising as many monogastric animals. Regarding ruminant herbivore systems in the TYFA model,

They all maximise the use of extensive grasslands in line with an approach based on non-competition between animal feed and human food. The efficiency of these systems is low if we just look at energy (the conversion of solar energy into plant then animal biomass), but it becomes high if we consider that they make use of what humans cannot eat. The extensive grassland approach implies changing

22. Mike Davis (2005). *The Monster At Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu.*

breeds and performance criteria. *Physical productivity (the quantity of meat or milk per animal) becomes secondary, in favour of criteria such as hardiness and the ability to eat fodder resources containing more woody species that are available over a longer period.* In some cases, herd management may imply grazing animals learning to valorize semi-natural ecosystems.²³ (emphasis ours)

Whether or not a local commune or city or whatever feels the need to consume animal products in their diets (we still hold out the possibility of some sort of vegan utopian commune like we pictured when we were teenagers listening to Earth Crisis and reading Murray Bookchin), livestock remain useful, and there is no reason at all to expect communist society to treat them the same hideous way capitalist society does. As long as the rearing of livestock follows agroecological lines, prioritizing the roles played by each animal in the broader ecological systems, we will not have to assume a complete abandoning of meat and dairy. Livestock may prove vital to functioning agroecological systems, not only by nourishing our diets but also by sustaining ecological systems such as meadowlands.

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Beyond what we've briefly discussed here, namely preliminary approaches to transitioning away from synthetic inputs, improving the condition of the soil, diversifying cropping systems and a decrease in agricultural labor productivity, there are a large number of other, less abstract problems to be solved in a socialist agroecological system. These include on-farm questions such as the localized requirements of crops from perennials to annuals/biannuals, more specific crop rotations and disease prevention techniques, to the preservation and preparing of food as well as efficient produce transportation systems.

But even these additional questions are just a small part of the much larger system of socialist planning, and cannot be taken in isolation.

23. Xavier Poux and Pierre-Marie Aubert (2018). "An agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating: Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise".

When we defined agriculture at the beginning of this essay, we mentioned that if we only looked at the on-farm practices of agriculture, we would lose sight of the bigger picture. To take that a step further and paraphrase a well-known quote, when we pick out any single system on its own, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. Socialist agricultural planning necessarily includes energy, housing and transportation planning. It includes what we eat and who we eat it with. It includes social reproduction and the hefty decisions of what we are working towards as a society. Our point being, anyone involved in socialist agricultural research must necessarily be in conversation researchers from every other sector of the planning field.

What Must Change

The danger of discussing any kind of model, especially one predicated on a classless society, is that we tend to assume a linear leap to a time and place where the model can be implemented. For our purposes, we assumed that a classless society capable of rational planning and coordination had just sort of sprung into existence in all places at once.

As revolutionary socialists, communists and anarchists, we all make this mistake intentionally because a transitional revolutionary period is much more dangerous and chaotic than we give it credit for. We romanticize revolutions because their reality is so violent that it's better to have a strategy that involves riling people up for revolution, having a plan for what we do after we get power and just hoping for the best between now and then. This is also the answer to why proles don't just rebel for communism today. Ideological indoctrination aside, very few proles are actually against the ideas of a classless society. It would be in all of our best interests to just do communism now. But it is very much not in any prole's interest to actually go through with the system shattering act of carrying out a revolution.

And this is why, if any of us are still serious and committed to the idea of revolutionary politics, we need to be honest with ourselves. The goal of us lefties can't just be to agitate, organize and educate. It needs to be to plan communist systems in advance, both to implement in the early

stages of communism and during the tumultuous revolutionary period. It's worth pointing out that these will be a very different set of systems, and that, however much we might want the revolution to be a short bump on the path of human development, it might be an extended and constantly evolving period. Planning literature needs to take both of these periods into account, with the hope that revolutionary planning will ease us nicely into status-quo communist planning.²⁴

So how do we apply these ideas to agroecology? The first thing to consider, and something we probably should have brought up earlier, is that agroecology requires much more practice to get a sense of its possibilities. For example, in the TYFA model, estimates for future yields are left conservative as the authors of the paper consider agroecology an "innovation pathway" which, once adopted on a large scale, will lead to compounding innovations. This might sound like a copout, but the logic is sound. The development of the general intellect in society is a crucial factor for other forms of innovation: indirectly in capitalism, directly in communism. Once society collectively is able to drive innovation not for maximum efficiency but for ecological utility and variety, there would be no reason to suspect innovation would halt. Agroecology is a hard thing to practice under capitalism - partly because it's necessary to practice at scale to get a sense of its full capabilities, and partly because this type of lower-efficiency agriculture is not rewarded in the competitive commodity economy.

But this is exactly why it's necessary to attempt as much of this innovation now as possible. The period of mass revolutionary turmoil needs

24. If we wanted to further periodize socialist planning, we might say that the first stage will be revolutionary planning, when the chaos of the struggle over the entire capitalist productive apparatus will be the determining factor in planning. The second would be a period of formal subsumption, when planning must make do with the productive forces left to us from capitalism. The determining factor in this stage of planning will be overhauling the capitalist productive forces to force them to better fit communal property relations, and will include climate disaster planning and the remodeling of the way we labor. Finally, the third period will be what we called communist "status-quo" planning, when the last vestiges of capitalism have gone from our lives (in its infrastructure and philosophies) and we are able to plan a really subsumed communist society. Each stage of planning will require a completely different orientation and structure.

to be kept as short as possible, especially when it comes to the question of producing food. How this is done prior to a revolution is a large question, with answers ranging from worker's coops to mass party led investment into agricultural research to individuals to groups with access to small plots of land experimenting with cultivars, yields and other processes. As utopian as it sounds, proles organizing pockets of agricultural production under capitalism may just be a prerequisite for a successful revolution. To speak in truisms, a revolution that can't adequately supply its people won't be supplied for very long. And what sounds more utopian? A mass, sudden seizing of the agricultural means of production without major disruption to the food supply, or the development of independent agricultural networks before the period of upheaval? Our point being, the latter, however possible it may be, would seem to be a necessity in one form or another for the revolution to succeed. This is especially true as capitalism enters its death throes and its ability to supply food dwindles - at times slowly and at times abruptly.

Strategies for preparation like this always seem to fall victim to a kind of collapse fetishizing accelerationism. There's obviously a real danger to this since rumors of capitalism's demise have long been greatly overstated. Until the thing topples over once and for all, it's best to assume things are going to get just slightly worse everyday until there's some system shock like the collapse of the FIRE sectors due to climate chaos, a large war, or some other event that would be hard to accurately predict. Leave the apocalypse predictions to the millenarians. When organizing around strategies of preparation, you need to orient yourself properly, by which we mean less around predictions and guesses and more around concrete situations currently in existence. The Black Panthers enjoyed success partly due to their ability to look around American inner-cities, accurately diagnose the needs of the black prole population and act accordingly. Kids weren't getting enough nutrition before and during school, so the Panthers stepped in to offer free breakfasts for schoolchildren, building concrete support for a project aimed at overthrowing the white supremacist American state.

The TYFA model hints at one such need currently going unful-

filled which is the need for abundant, healthy food. The model, based on a 10-year mass restructuring of Europe's agricultural production and imports, sees a decline in overall production due to a sharp cut in imports.²⁵ Part of the way the model retains the ability to feed the continent's population in spite of this production decline is through a change in society-wide diets. The diet suggested by the authors

...contains fewer animal products (but those consumed are of better quality) and less sugar; on the other hand, it is higher in fibre and contains more—seasonal—fruit and vegetables. Overall, it is more nutritionally balanced and has absolute environmental quality if we consider the replacement of pesticides by beneficial organisms.²⁶

The upshot being that modern diets in Europe and elsewhere in the imperial core are excessively unbalanced and unhealthy. In states that are peripheral to the imperial core things are much the same, but there is obviously a much larger strata of society in these states that simply does not have enough to eat, healthy or otherwise. As we've repeated time and time again in this essay, organizing a society around maximum efficiency necessarily clashes with our ability to grow food. What is urgently needed now is for socialist movements to pioneer agroecological systems, proving in practice that global food security can only be achieved through a classless society. How likely this is to happen depends to a certain extent on our own efforts. Today's struggles for a classless society are unique in that if they fail, they may not simply open the door to another century of capitalism. A failure today, in the face of the global climate and biodiversity crises, will be much more ruinous.

25. Besides encouraging local food sovereignty, the cut in imports in the TYFA model are mainly the result of halting feed imports for livestock from the Americas.

26. Xavier Poux and Pierre-Marie Aubert (2018). "An agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating: Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise".



ESCHATOLOGY AND GENESIS

BY J. V. MARSCH

It's a strange phenomenon that as the world enters a long, slow decline, most conversations about preparing for collapse are dominated by the far right.

Every right wing influencer and their mother has, at some point, leveraged fears about the collapse of civil society to sell their knuckle-dragging audience male health supplements or disaster preparedness kits. It's all snake oil, and though part of me has to respect a good scam whenever I see it, I can't help but feel confused seeing the way in which the right has coopted, in their own funny little way, disaster prep.

Prepping has always been a bit of a blind spot for the left. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that any principled revolutionary socialist expects there to be a class war in-between now and the onset of socialism and in a sense, this is disaster encouragement rather than prep. But more and more, collapse is becoming less an abstract concept and more a lived reality for many around the world. The long, terminal decline of capitalism has forced proles worldwide to contend with a system that is increasingly incapable of meeting even the most basic requirements of social reproduction. Capitalist agriculture is destroying its own material foundation through soil erosion. A warming planet is leading to more extreme weather events. Economic growth has stalled and employment has become dangerously precarious. The welfare functions of capitalist states have been massively undercut, and mass human migrations have begun as our fellow proles flee wars and collapsing states. Collapse, to me, should not be seen as a final event whereby everyone has to get their go-bag and flee to their underground bunker in the woods, but as something that has been happening for a long time now. It has been, and will continue to be, a long drawn out process, where the norms of life under capitalism slowly fall away in a series of upheavals. Catastrophic for some, barely noticeable for others.

In the face of these crises, socialist agitators and organizers need to have an understanding of collapse and its relationship to the class struggle. Importantly, we need to distinguish our project of disaster preparedness from the reactionary project of prepping by the far right. In

so doing, we can begin to understand how we might build independent proletarian capabilities that presage the coming classless society.

THE BAD

Everyone is scared, and many are making contingent plans for some disaster event, whether that be war, a wildfire, the looming threat of unemployment or simply being unable to meet your next rent payment. But it's important to recognize that not all methods of preparing for a disaster event are inherently progressive. Like all social movements, they have a class character, and this is nowhere more obvious than in what we might creatively call the bad fascist kind of prepping.

The bad fascist kind of prepping is probably what you've seen on social media if you've engaged with this stuff in any way. It's a fetishization of collapse, an excitement in the coming social turmoil that will see only the strong survive and society purified and rid of all its weak or poisonous elements. There's no surprise that at its worst, this becomes fertile recruiting grounds for white supremacists posting on TikTok or paranoid suburbanites bringing AR-15s to confront BLM protestors, ostensibly to protect their McMansions or fast food franchises, but really to try and fill the suburb shaped voids in their hearts with violence. Collapse in this worldview is vulgarly Darwinian, encouraging the survival of the "fittest" - society is being destroyed from within by some kind of fifth column, usually either leftists, Jews, immigrants or some combination of all three. If it seems contradictory that collapse here is both good in the sense that it purifies but bad because it's being caused by all of society's enemies, well, it both is and isn't.

At its extreme, the bourgeois answer to political and economic conflict is always violence. Capitalism necessarily presents itself as a rational mode of production, or at the very least, one that obeys laws very different to its actual laws. Simply put, this is because of commodity fetishism. The reality of the exploitation that constitutes profit is necessarily masked by an economy of things - an economy that seemingly operates rationally and trades commodities not based on the amount of social labor congealed inside of them, but by their inherent qualities or

the demand for them. The fundamental contradiction of capitalist society, exchange value vs use value, is hidden. The fundamental source of profit, surplus value, is also hidden. Everything about the commodity economy appears natural. Therefore, the cyclical crises attendant to our mode of production appear as aberrations in a rational system: they can be solved with a degree of finality that does not involve reckoning with the social reality of capitalism. Of course, this is not the case. But my point is that capitalism necessarily covers its tracks by virtue of the very social relations that make it up. It forces us to look for answers to the problems it creates everywhere except in the social relations of the mode of production itself

Because of this, capitalist politics can only amount to individuals operating seemingly freely within a marketplace of ideas with better or worse solutions to the various crises we face (all solutions that, we must remind ourselves, fundamentally ignore the real social context of collapse). When profit rates stagnate and civil society decays, it couldn't possibly be on account of the core contradictions that make up our society. No, those contradictions appear natural. It must be because the wrong people are in power or are influencing society in the wrong directions.

As the capitalist system begins its drawn-out collapse, political projects across the spectrum have had to come up with answers for why nothing seems to be getting any better and, increasingly, what to do in case it all falls apart. For the far right, this coalesces into a reactionary attempt at preparing for the worst based on "weathering the storm" and weeding out the most troublesome elements of society. What's needed in this political framing is a purge, a cleanse, a draining of the swamp. Real fears around collapse turn into opportunities for long held prejudices to turn violent, and, for the bad fascist kind of preppers, this is something they have been waiting for. This kind of prepping presents itself as resistance, but we have to ask ourselves, resistance to what? Certainly not to capitalism, nor really to politicians or even specific capitalists.

Collapse in this regard is both a foregone conclusion and a state of reality to be actively encouraged. In their essay "Is Left Survivalism

Possible?” Özgür Yılmaz states that

Apocalyptic narratives are frequently intertwined with the belief in Aryan purity, reinforcing a vision of an inevitable final battle that will determine the fate of civilization. Today’s fascists often employ Christian eschatological metaphors, invoking the idea of an impending Armageddon in which divine intervention punishes sinners through disasters, wars, and crises. These catastrophic events are not merely seen as destruction but as necessary precursors to a purified world order, offering a moral justification for political and social cleansing. Over time, this apocalyptic rhetoric delineates clear battle lines between the righteous and the corrupt, further solidifying a binary worldview that fuels reactionary mobilization. By constructing a framework where collapse is framed as both inevitable and desirable, right-wing apocalypticism fosters an exclusionary, militant mentality that not only anticipates but actively prepares for societal breakdown as a means of ushering in a new order.¹

And yet this “new order” need not be anything particularly new. Prepping for the apocalyptic right involves removing the unwanted elements from society in order to simultaneously create a future utopia and return to an ill-defined and idealized period in the past. From here, we see wannabe homesteaders on social media living off grid with a carefully curated cottagecore aesthetic. These movements romanticize pre-industrial skills and idealize the (cis and hetero) family as the foundational unit of society. The misogyny embedded in this worldview is easy to see: women and children are relegated to domestic roles in service of the husband. What’s less immediately apparent, however, is the deeper contradiction at its core, namely, the fantasy of self-sufficiency itself. True self-sufficiency is effectively impossible. Even in cases where a family relocates to rural Idaho and claims nominal self-sufficiency through growing potatoes, harvesting chicken eggs and homeschooling their children, the vast

1. Özgür Yılmaz (2025). “Is Left Survivalism Possible?”, Cosmonaut Magazine.

amount of labor “external” to their family compound embedded in their tools, clothes, homes, roads, and utility infrastructure goes suspiciously unacknowledged. Self-sufficiency is not only a myth but is completely undesirable. It runs counter to the entirety of the human social project. The reactionary romanticism of the prepper, survivalist and homesteader reminds us less of the utopian futures of Le Guin or Bookchin, and more of middle class tories like Tolkien and his conservative ilk. Utopia becomes something to regress to, not build towards. It is not a society without class, of free and equal producers, but a world without pasteurisation or the Bureau of Land Management.

THE GOOD

Against this collapse fetishization, Yilmaz, taking their lead from Walter Benjamin, argues that a left prepper strategy

need not be a passive acceptance of catastrophe. It holds potential as a politically-engaged critique of industrial capitalism’s unsustainability. By framing collapse not as an inescapable fate but as a call to rethink economic and social structures, collapsology could serve as an impetus for radical transformation rather than mere survivalist retreat. Instead of simply chronicling decline, a left-leaning collapsology could challenge the systems driving ecological and social devastation, mobilizing action rather than reinforcing despair.²

And I think this is broadly true. Collapse has many meanings and looks very different across its diverse conditions. But in a capitalist context, it means nothing more than the inability of our given set of social relations to manage the social and ecological crises they have created. It’s worth being more specific here about why these events (civil unrest, power outages, extreme weather events, soil erosion, etc.) create opportunities for organizing, lest we fall into the collapse fetishizing of the right. The collapse we are referring to as socialists is not the kind of collapse that sees everyone become independent homesteaders or petty warlords.

2. Ibid.

Nor is it simply the collapse of state power, of war or of the biodiversity crisis. What we are referring to is the specific set of conditions that lead to the collapse of capitalism's hold on the proletariat, both ideologically and materially, and the opportunities this creates for building a classless society. Simply, the death throes of capitalism.

TOWARDS AND AGAINST COLLAPSE

In *Worker's Councils*, Anton Pannekoek gives a reasoned approach to what we might call the revolutionary motives among the proletariat.

The dominant and deepest impulse in humanity as in every living being is our instinct of self-preservation. It compels us to defend our lives with all our powers. Fear and submissiveness also are the effect of this instinct, when against powerful masters they afford the best chances for preservation. Among the various dispositions in humankind those which are most adapted to secure life in the existing circumstances will prevail and develop. *In the daily life of capitalism it is impractical, even dangerous for a worker to nurture their feelings of independence and pride; the more they suppress them and tacitly obey, the less difficulty they will encounter in finding and keeping their job...*³(emphasis mine)

Let's pause here to emphasize this critical point. Most of our time as agitators or organizers is spent banging our head against the wall wondering why, if we have all the answers, the proletariat won't listen to us and do a god damn revolution. Capitalism is obviously ripping the world apart, we as a class obviously have the power to destroy it and build a better world, so why are so many of our fellow proles voting for effing Trump or Reform or, for that matter, Biden or Labour, when what we really need to be doing is building class power. Well, because that wouldn't really make sense. On an abstract level, it is obviously in everyone's best interest to rebel and build socialism. But on a concrete level, revolution usually means violence and disruptions to supply chains (i.e. food). It

3. Anton Pannekoek (1947). *Worker's Councils*.

is therefore not in anyone's best interest to stick their head out in even mildly rebellious ways if the threat of losing their well-being is at stake. If anyone reading this has experience organizing trade unions or strikes, you'll be very familiar with this timidity among our fellow proles when it comes to demanding even the smallest concessions from bosses. But Pannekoek continues,

When, however, in times of social crisis and danger all this submissivity, this virtuousness, is of no avail to secure life, when only fighting can help, then it gives way to its contrary, to rebelliousness and courage. Then the bold set the example and the timid discover with surprise of what deeds of heroism they are capable. Then self-reliance and high-spiritedness awake in them and grow, because on their growth depend their chances of life and happiness. And at once, by instinct and by experience, they know that only collaboration and union can give strength to their masses. When then they perceive what forces are present in themselves and in their comrades, when they feel the happiness of this awakening of proud self-respect and devoted brotherhood, when they anticipate a future of victory, when they see rising before them the image of the new society they help to build, then enthusiasm and ardor grow to irresistible power. Then the working class begins to be ripe for revolution. Then capitalism begins to be ripe for collapse.⁴

If we can create a synthesis of the ideas put forward by Yılmaz and Pannekoek, it would be something like this. Proles are motivated, like any other group, by material self-interest. To a certain extent, we can view socialism as a mode of production that organically unites self-interest with the common interest of society. This is part of the reason that Marx predicts high communism sees “work become life's prime want”⁵. Capitalism, however, reinforces the atomization and competitiveness brought about by private property both on an ideological and material

4. Ibid.

5. Karl Marx, (1875). Critique of the Gotha Program.

level, seeing proles and capitalists act in a self-interested fashion that is oftentimes disconnected from the common needs of society. Capitalists produce commodities that are harmful and do not produce, or under-produce, commodities we vitally need. All us proles are in competition with each other for work. Thus, the goal of a communist political project today needs to be based, at some level, on finding ways to show our class that it is in fact in our best interests to act together as a class.

The way this ties into the collapse of capitalism should be getting more and more obvious every day. The collapse fetishizing right offers proles nothing in the face of global crisis but empty dreams of self-reliance in a complex and interdependent world. Socialist, however, are uniquely capable of showing that it is only in a world without class or private property that we are able to realize our full potential. To a very real extent, the only kind of prepping for collapse that would permanently work is just seizing the means of production. But this runs us into a seeming dead end. The commune building that would need to be at the core of a left collapsology is all but impossible in anything but the most dire of circumstances. Efforts in Ferguson, Seattle, etc. to create autonomous zones free from state interference are crushed quickly and relatively easily by the state. There are two solutions to the problem of state repression in this regard. We either wait for state power to decay to a point where these actions are possible or we seek out ways to fill in the cracks in civil society that this slow decay creates, simultaneously building something new and tearing down the old. Both seem utopian, and the former option should not be regarded as a strategy but a contingency plan, but I might claim that it's utopian to think that the latter is not becoming a necessary part of socialist organizing.

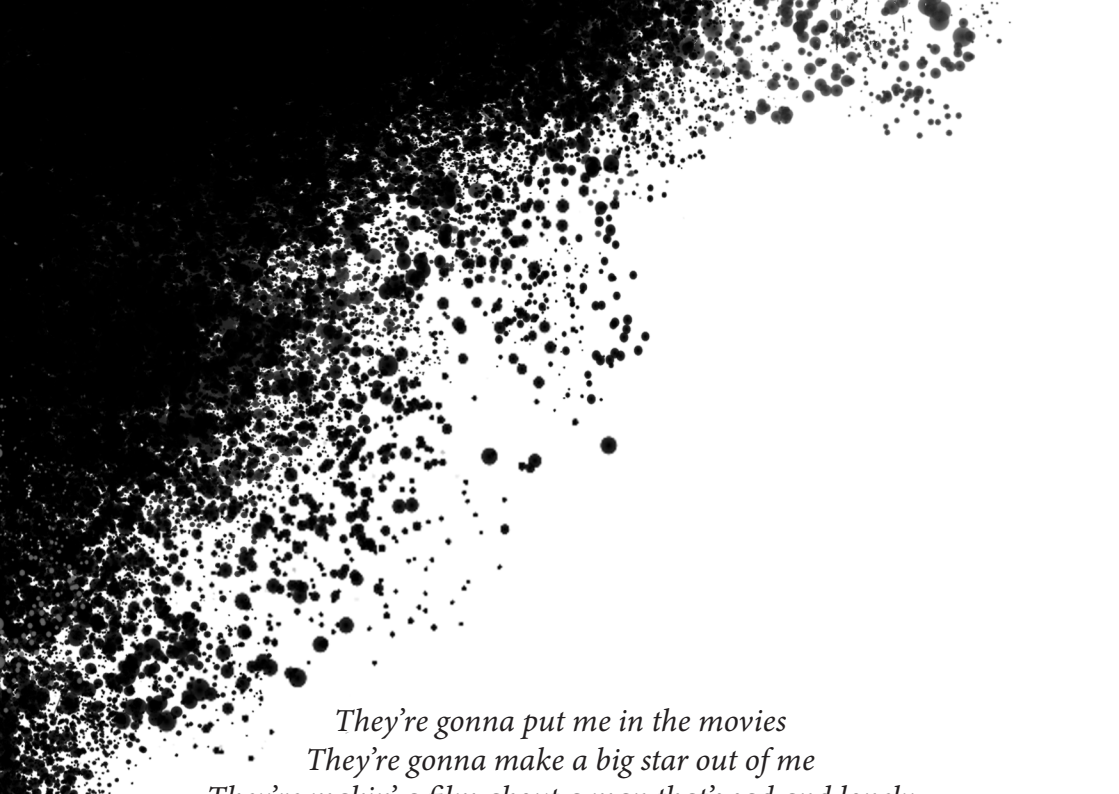
As we watch the slow decay of states attendant to the long, terminal crisis of capitalism, more and more of their welfare functions are being jettisoned. In a state like the United States, basic infrastructure components from transportation systems to simple utility networks are being left to rot (the Flint water crisis, for example, lasted a full decade). Decent healthcare in the US is a pipe dream for many proles. Sooner rather than later, the soil erosion attendant to capitalist attempts to turn the natural

flows of energy and nutrients in the earth into factory systems will compromise our ability to grow enough food. These voids left by a decaying capitalism create ample organizing spaces for any political project that can demonstrate real ability to fill in these gaps. Looking at the state of the globe, it seems obvious that any left political project worth its salt will need to find ways to not just prepare for this type of collapse, but find ways to urgently respond to them.

If that sounds like a daunting task for the same left that can't even agree on a name for Your Party, then perhaps we need to reframe what this left-collapsology would mean for us as organizers. No left political project will be able to immediately come up with ways to provide safe drinking water, organize worker's militias that replace the police and the army and grow enough food to detach itself from the capitalist world. But it will need to do these things at some point. And so the answer to how to organize in the face of capitalist collapse becomes the same as the answer to how to organize in the face of capitalist prosperity: we, as individuals and groups of organizers, must survey our local terrain, identify areas of conflict between the proletariat and state and economic structures specific to our environment and use those sites of conflict to push the class struggle forward. The difference between left-collapsology and more orthodox left political projects is that the former undertakes action with the explicit goal of providing for proles during periods of systemic decay, while also attempting to soften, as much as possible, the turbulence that accompanies revolutionary struggle by beginning to build independent social systems today.

To bring it all together, we need to be mobilizing proles on two fronts: to protect communities from the worst of capitalism's death throes, and to ensure that in doing this, we are building towards a classless society. This makes a left prepper strategy stand in stark contrast to its right counterpart. Where the right-wing preppers fetishize a bizarre array of skills to be used independently of social context, a left-wing preparedness project necessarily must be much more forward looking. It must analyze its social context and intervene in accordance with it, helping proles as part of our moral obligation as socialists, but also as part of a broader

strategic gambit. Part of this project is research into new ways to organize production, part of this is direct action. But the more we are able to develop our own capabilities as a class before a large-scale collapse event, the better. The development of proletarian capacities in this context must be seen not as adjacent to the idealized class struggle, but as one of its primary engines.



*They're gonna put me in the movies
They're gonna make a big star out of me
They're makin' a film about a man that's sad and lonely
And all I got to do is act naturally...¹*

ACT NATURALLY

BY ALICE SPRINGS

1. These lines are, of course, from Buck Owens' *Act Naturally*, though the idea for using them in this context came from the cover (rewrite?) of the song by The Nerve Institute.

Unfortunately, your annoying friend who loves to say that we are all living in a simulation is getting harder and harder to refute by pointing to the real world.

Yesterday, Charlie Kirk, who was in the middle of one of his circle-jerk debate me! rallies designed to sell pseudointellectual bourgeois hate-speech and overly large MAGA hats to impressionable young mormons, got his shit absolutely blipped by a terminally online and alienated young shooter. Everyone rushed to social media to give their takes. Trump shed a tear. Charlie Kirk died in a hospital in Utah.

The symbolism of it all is too much. Way too much. And that's probably why everyone was bursting to give their version of *What Really Happened* - what the media isn't telling you.

It was all a set-up.

The CIA is at it again!

*It was a sacrificial psyop by intelligence
mastermind Donald Trump.*

*The woke liberals are out to take my
guns and shoot my thick-skulled pseuds!*

What really happened, as it turns out, is already enough to make your head spin (or neck burst). No conspiracies needed. So let's indulge ourselves and tell this singularly American story from its beginning to get ourselves into the headspace where we can accurately talk about American politics.

///

Once upon a time, a bright young man with a mammoth braincase was noticed by the conservative establishment due to his penchant for being an annoying little asshole. After volunteering for the election campaign of a Republican senator famous for, among other things, taking part in the bombing of Yugoslavia and lying about his career in Naval Intelligence to sound cool, young Charlie Kirk and his engorged cranium moved onto

bigger and better things, namely, writing an viral article for Breitbart on why his high-school textbooks were too fuckin woke. After appearing on Fox News to explain this thinkpiece to a bunch of drooling baby boomers, our macrocephalic hero dropped out of college to pursue his true calling: being a dipshit on camera for money.

Further showing off his predisposition for getting noticed by syphilitic old white men, Kirk met a tea party backed political candidate at a catholic university's Youth Empowerment Day and the two instantly hit it off. Together, they formed Turning Point USA, an embarrassing and moderately successful attempt to instill conservative values in high schools and colleges around the country.

We more or less know what happens next. Kirk does his little tours, he spews genocidal rhetoric against trans people, college students protest and he makes money off the attention. His last stop was a public college in Orem, Utah surrounded on all sides by Mormon temples and a Wal-Mart supercenter. He spoke to a crowd of a few hundred in a wide-open area just around the corner from the campus' Chick-fil-A. One moment he was riling the crowd up about "trans mass shooters" and the next, well, you know.

Some time later, when the Governor of Utah and the FBI Director gave their press conference announcing that the shooter had been apprehended, they both started their briefs with strange one-liners written no doubt by intern speech writers, overpaid consultants or an unpaid subscription to a generative AI platform. The Governor began his speech by stealing Obama's line - "We got him" - and the FBI Director said something I'm still trying to understand - "This is what happens when you let good cops be cops" - as if the bar for capturing high profile assassins is so low that we all just assumed the police would accidentally shoot fifteen innocent bystanders and have five cases of internal fentanyl poisoning before they caught the perpetrator.

And so it goes. Thus comes to an end the short, strange story of Charlie Kirk.

At about 12:20, he is asked by a member of the crowd: "Do you know how many transgender Americans have been mass shooters over the last 10 years?"

He replies: "Too many."

The questioner then states there had been five in 10 years and asks Kirk how many mass shootings there had been in that time.

"Counting or not counting gang violence?" Kirk replies.

Then a single shot is heard, which is believed to have been fired from the roof of the Losee Center, a building overlooking the quad.

From the BBC's live coverage of the incident. Kirk manages for his last words to be dogwhistles for both transphobia and racism in a record 8 words.²

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So why begin this essay with a retrospective on a successful but ultimately forgettable sicko who was just another fascist in the long line of right wing American culture warriors? Because Kirk's story is so of our time, so far-cical, that it's hard not to marvel at the absurdity of it all. Here was a guy who was indoctrinated since high school with reactionary propaganda. Here was a guy who was shown the path to the summit of all American summits: Celebrity. Shown how to live forever in the sphere of hyperindividual immortality that we're all told from our first moments to our last that we could reach if we only try hard enough. Here was a guy who thought he could change the world all on his own, encouraged along the way by sickly old men with conservative agendas who used him, told him he was doing great, and that he was just what this country needed. He performed his duties to a T...and got absolutely annihilated by a random sniper's bullet in front of a crowd adoring fans with cameras at the age of 31 for his troubles, his blood spouting out of his neck like a broken fire hydrant all over those enormous Trump hats, one of which will surely, one day, wind up in a museum.³

2. Tiffanie Turnbull (2025). "Suspect in custody and named as Tyler Robinson - what we know so far", BBC News.

3. It appears, in fact, that the hats were immediately stolen by a young man posing and filming himself for social media as the crowd around him was screaming and running for cover, yelling "It's ya boi, eldertiktok...this is not a drill, there is a gunfire in Utah, shots fired...read the book of Mormon...bruh I'm not even lying, make sure you subscribe to eldertiktok in Instagram".

MODERN POLITICS

You ever just feel like you're going crazy? Like if only the rest of the proles would just recognize the world as YOU see it and acted accordingly then everything would finally change and we'd all be set free? Yeah? Well, I hate to break it to you, but that is the sign of a deeply rotten politics.

What counts for politics today in the United States and the rest of the imperial core is, as we'll later discuss, in no way socialist or really even politics as such. What we have today are a series of alienated ideas, all thoroughly detached from history and context, reacting against epiphenomena of a mode of production that is making a desperate attempt to endure against all hope. Everyone's ideas are defined by *being right*. Why is this?

To begin with, if you're anything like me, you know almost nobody who has it better off than their parents. Even if someone is ostensibly making more money than their parents ever did (probably by working at some ad agency or in coding or some shit), real wages have been stalled for 50 years and all of our waking hours are spent working one, two, three gigs to try and make ends meet. This is to say nothing of the decay of healthcare, public transit or paid vacation hours. Even life expectancy has fallen in the US since the beginning of COVID. According to a study from the National Center for Health Statistics, between 2019-2021 US life expectancy dropped 2.4 years for White Americans, 4.0 years for Black Americans, 4.2 years for Hispanic Americans and a staggering 6.6 years for Native American populations.⁴

But even though things have clearly been on a downhill trajectory for some time now, this has not been met by a concomitant rise in class consciousness among proles. Theorists like the late Joshua Clover attribute this to the qualitatively different moments in the cyclical movement of capital. Clover uses Giovanni Arrighi's three-sided scheme for so-called long centuries and cycles of accumulation, in which initial waves of economic expansion take place via finance (in Arrighi's scheme, merchant capital), followed by an expansion of industrial capital (where capital accumulates in a way we all recognize), and, once this reaches

4. Elizabeth Arias, et al. (2022). "Provisional Life Expectancy Estimates for 2021", National Center for Health Sciences.

its limits, a final financial expansion. This happens because capital goes where it believes investment is safest - it really doesn't care where that is. When the profit rate slows, capital races out of the productive sectors and into finance to invest in a series of get rich quick schemes, which usually amount to lying about the profitability of some asset before the buying party realizes how unprofitable it is.

Clover's main insight is to tie this idea into a theory of the form of class struggle, suggesting that "phases led by material production will issue forth struggles within production, over the price of labor power; phases led by circulation will see struggles in the marketplace, over the price of goods."⁵ When capital is primarily being invested in production, we see successful socialist organizing because capitalists are happy to share when things are going well and reticent to allow their greed to put the system at risk. When capital is primarily invested in finance schemes as industrial profitability slows, we see the opposite - capitalists are less willing to allow space for socialist organizing because the margins are so slim they need to be protected at all costs. Additionally, eras of investment in the finance sectors see commonplace price gouging and austerity to rescue the capitalist's margins by any means possible. The prole reaction against this is, to Clover, usually the riot. This stands in contrast to the direct forms of economic exploitation characteristic of periods of productive sector investment, where we see strikes as the primary tactic of resistance against capital. The main point here being that perhaps the idea of class struggle all us Marxists are comfortable with, good old workplace organizing and party building, can only successfully take place in that middle period where industrial capital is on the rise, the capitalists don't mind sharing a bit of the pie and direct economic exploitation is much more obvious.

Clover then goes on to suggest, using a version of Robert Brenner's Long Downturn theory, that the profit rates that would be necessary to encourage large scale investment in production are no longer possible. If we believe Brenner, this means we are living through capitalism's long, terminal crisis. This is reflected in the proletariat's crusade against finance,

5. Joshua Clover (2016). Riot. Strike. Riot.

which is so often directed toward various superstructural manifestations of capitalism, and seldom towards capitalism's underlying economic base. This causes a huge variety of loosely-defined "anti-capitalist" behaviors among the proles, none of which are truly anti-capitalist in the sense that they could seriously threaten the social relations that make up the mode of production.

It's in this way that capitalism, despite driving the world system towards a collapse, is able to mystify the sources of the misery we all feel - namely private property, production for exchange and alienated labor. What we experience as the obviously negative aspects of capitalism tend to be almost entirely superstructural: banks engaging in usury, politicians lying and stealing, worse and worse art, religious fanaticism...the list goes on and on.

This encourages a type of modern "politics" that can be defined with a few criteria:

1. Hyperindividualist
2. Ahistorical and detached from context
3. Heavily conspiratorial
4. Something that is best left to celebrities

To take the first first criteria, "hyperindividualist" here means primarily that YOU are right and that YOU have all the answers. The bourgeois ideology of individualism, whereby a series of rational actors make decisions in the supposedly classless society of capitalism that lead to them accumulating more or less wealth based on their intuition and expertise, is here brought to its logical conclusion. Call it the Oprah Ideology. Oprah Winfrey was born into more or less abject poverty in the American South. She entered the entertainment business at a young age, and eventually built a media empire that became so successful that she was, at one point, the only black billionaire on the planet. What we can say about Oprah's story is that it is a statistical anomaly on a very extreme scale. Realistically speaking, everyone else born in Oprah's circumstances finds themselves in the exact same circumstances when they die. But that

doesn't stop every econ major on the planet from spewing the ideology of the self-made entrepreneur, ignoring the fact that just about every capitalist not named Oprah Winfrey got their start from the best economic strategy of all, namely, having rich parents.

Because the class boundaries of capitalism are, in theory, porous, meaning any worker can technically become a capitalist and vice versa, there is a prevailing sentiment that grinding and working your ass off will somehow leave you with enough seed money to sit on a rent or become the exploiter instead of the exploited. This has the surprising effect that, as global economic conditions get worse and worse, the ideology of individualism becomes stronger. Politically, we all think we and we alone have the answers. This could be YOUR interpretation of Marx's value theory, Marx's politics, or, on the more liberal end, that the democrats should just be doing what YOU'VE been saying, that way they wouldn't lose so many elections to republicans who can barely tie their shoes. Social media, the modern news delivery system of choice, has the excellent characteristic of reinforcing YOUR correct ideas by basically just monitoring what you engage with and feeding you more of it.

This leads nicely into our second criteria for modern politics, which is that it is entirely detached from historical context. Bourgeois ideologues love to pull this shit by claiming that capitalism has always existed and that it's the "natural" state of complex human society. Current events get normalized to this natural society and become less the semi-predictable outcomes of a productive mode based on exploitation and domination and more about the bad decisions of various political actors. Trump isn't engaging in a doomed campaign of protectionism because certain segments of the ruling classes are trying desperately to recover some semblance of profitability, he's doing it because he's the dumb orange guy from The Apprentice who knows nothing about economics! The fool! Studying history is transformed into reading biographies. Studying politics becomes reading autobiographies.

This Great Man theorizing of history leads everyone to become deeply conspiratorial with their politics, whether they realize it or not.

When Trump had one of his more recent assassination scares, nearly everyone, no matter their politics, started spewing theories about how he had either organized the whole thing as a false flag or, on the conservative end of the spectrum, that it was woke jewish transgenderism gone mad or some shit. If current events can only be explained by the isolated actions of our decrepit ruling class, the mad search for reason in a chaotic world becomes the search for connections between events and actors at the superstructural level. Trump has failed to organize a peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine not because Russia and the United States have opposing imperialist, geopolitical aims in Europe, but because Putin has a video of Trump getting pissed on!

It's incredibly easy to think like this, in part, because things are so absurd at the moment and strange connections between disparate events are simple enough to find. This does have the effect of baffling even the most level-headed among us. If you really make an effort to understand the concrete ways in which capitalism functions, you're predictably going to wind up finding some absurd shit. Personally, I like basketball quite a bit, and the Kawhi Leonard salary cap circumvention stuff has been fascinating to watch unfold. To give an example of how easy it is to fly off the rails into conspiracy world, let's take a look at Leonard's sticky situation. Anti-sports nerds just skip to the next paragraph.

It came out recently that NBA superstar Kawhi Leonard had been given a no-work-pay endorsement at a firm called Aspiration when he arrived at the sad and pathetic LA Clippers as a way of paying him more than the league would allow. Aspiration was the stupidest company on the planet. It made its money by "selling carbon neutrality" to companies by calculating their carbon footprint and planting enough trees to supposedly counteract these emissions (let's ignore that they never planted the trees they said they did). It got a massive stock boost when Steve Ballmer, the melon-headed owner of the Clippers and former CEO of Microsoft, invested \$50 million in the company which was, at that point, failing. Ballmer, wanting to drag the Clippers out of perennial embarrassment, built a new stadium for the team in a predominantly poor, black neighborhood funded in large part by the naming rights which were purchased

by finance corporation Intuit. The price of the naming rights was inflated massively by a bid from...Aspiration, the company Ballmer funded and used to illegally pay Kawhi Leonard. Of the two founders of Aspiration, one is under investigation for wire fraud to the tune of ~\$250 million and the other, weirdly, is not. Perhaps this is because this latter capitalist, Andrei Cherny, has been a mover and shaker in the Democratic Party for over 30 years. His accolades, comically, include losing elections for the California State Assembly, Treasurer of Arizona and both Arizona's 9th and 1st congressional districts. He was also the main drafter of the 2000 democratic party platform when Al Gore lost that world historic election to the stupidest man on the planet and was a speechwriter for John Kerry when he lost that world historic election. But don't worry, because the guy that has been an integral part of just about every major democratic fuckup for the last 25 years is back writing policy for the next democratic presidential candidate with a project he calls "Project 2029".⁶ All of this to say, if you're like me and sometimes just want to know a little bit more about your favorite pastime, you wind up going down a rabbit hole that leads you to the Lovecraftian knowledge of how inbred our modern political establishments are and how closely intertwined every aspect of capitalist society is with greed and power. And how it's always like the same 100 capitalists at the center of it all.

Finally, this gets us to my personal favorite aspect of the psychotic shitshow we call modern politics: celebrity. Whether we want to admit it or not, we all fall into the trap of believing that part of the key to changing the world is our celebrity of choice. For the MAGA chuds out there, this is obviously just the swamp-draining president. For liberals it's whoever is organizing the next Live-Aid, or perhaps Biden or Harris or Buttigieg or whatever vampiric consultant is next in line for the throne. For socialists it's Sanders and Corbyn when it seems like they might get elected/become prime minister, and when they lose it's Paul Cockshott (ugh), Andrew Kliman, Michael Heinrich, Mike MacNair or whoever the guy is at the RCP that doesn't believe in the Big Bang.

Crucially, however, this celebrity also includes YOU. Change is not

6. Shane Goldmacher (2025). "Sound Familiar? Democrats Lay Groundwork for a 'Project 2029'", New York Times.

longer affected by collective action, it's done by spewing the "right ideas" loud enough for everyone to hear. This is why you had to sit through your friend from high-school's Instagram story about "WHY YOU ACTUALLY SHOULDN'T GLORIFY THE CHARLIE KIRK SHOOTER ACTUALLY" and why that person, and everyone else, is hard at work building a "brand" or side-hustle of one type or another. Ideas, just like everything else, are commodities, and those commodities are bought and sold, traded on a market that encourages hot takes that are easy to identify with. It's why everyone has a Palestinian flag as their avatar but refuses to go to protests or **** ***** making ***** for *****.

I hate to psycho-analyze the guy, but the Charlie Kirk shooter was probably just trying to be a Celebrity like the rest of us. Celebrity, used here, refers to a mythological level of ideology that exists separately from the person who supposedly is The Celebrity. TAYLOR SWIFT™ isn't actually the probably quite nice and agreeable human named Taylor Swift. DONALD TRUMP™ means so much more than just the failson of a New York real estate developer. Celebrity is a sphere of ideological status that everyone is trying constantly to achieve, because we all believe it's the only way to a) make our difficult lives retroactively mean something, and b) affect change. The cruel irony of Celebrity is that once achieved, it kills the human that was the host. Trump has been driven insane by being given everything he could ever want and consistently failing until he became president, the Kirk shooter was driven to such extreme alienation in his drive to become a Celebrity that it all culminated in an act of shocking, public violence. Celebrity kills. Modern politics kills. What now.

WHAT NOW.

What stochastic acts of political violence like the Kirk shooting seem to show us that things are cooked. Perhaps irreparably. I don't mean that in the pearl-clutching liberal way, I mean it in a political sense. Politics for us socialists has always been a collective act. It unfolds at the class level and serves as the mechanism through which a Marxist theory of conflict is realized by classes acting for themselves. But we have to be careful with our vocabulary here. "Conflict" is a very slippery term. What do we mean by that?

In the liberal view of politics, conflict exists in terms of 'problems' which need to be 'solved'. The hidden assumption is that conflict does not, or need not, run very deep; that it can be 'managed' by the exercise of reason and good will, and a readiness to compromise and agree. On this view, politics is not civil war conducted by other means but a constant process of bargaining and accommodation, on the basis of accepted procedures, and between parties who have decided as a preliminary that they could and wanted to live together more or less harmoniously. Not only is this sort of conflict not injurious to society: it has positive advantages. It is not only civilized, but also civilizing. It is not only a means of resolving problems in a peaceful way, but also of producing new ideas, ensuring progress, achieving ever-greater harmony, and so on. Conflict is 'functional', a stabilizing rather than a disruptive force.

The Marxist approach to conflict is very different. It is not a matter of 'problems' to be 'solved' *but a state of domination and subjection to be ended by a total transformation of the conditions which gave rise to it*. No doubt conflict may be attenuated, but only because the ruling class is able by one means or another—coercion, concessions, or persuasion—to prevent the subordinate classes from seeking emancipation. Ultimately, stability is not a matter of reason but of force. The antagonists are irreconcilable, and the notion of genuine harmony is a deception or a delusion, at least in relation to class societies.⁷ (emphasis ours)

Clearly, the conflict that a socialist politics is attempting to solve cannot be done through normal, bourgeois channels. That's the whole point. Even if you're one of these social democrat Leninist/Kautskyist types (aka Stalinists with good intentions), you recognize that sooner or later in your crusade to institute the democratic republic, you're going to have to break the rules of the game. Bourgeois law will have to be broken,

7. Ralph Miliband (1977). *Marxism and Politics*.

because bourgeois law is the thing that keeps the whole mode of production in check and ticking along.

To speak in more concrete terms, capitalism relies on two distinct types of violence, without which, it would not be able to function. The first is economic - money is coercion. Our entire productive apparatus is put to use for the sole purpose not of meeting needs, but for maximizing exchange value. The way in which you're forced to get up everyday and work for this system of profit is through your wages. Capitalists do not pay workers a certain percentage of the value they create, with wages going up or down depending on the productivity of the work being done. They pay workers what their labor power is worth. Which is to say, how much it costs to reproduce a worker of such and such a type. Waiters require less training from society than doctors, for example, so are paid less because it is much cheaper to replace a waiter than a doctor. Regardless of your wage, however, the fact that you have a wage means you rely on it to survive, and so are forced to sell your labor power to some prick capitalist in order to have a roof over your head and food in your stomach.

The second type of violence required by capitalism is much more obvious, and this is the repressive function of society. From local cops in small towns with tanks and automatic weapons at their disposal to national armies with drones and fighter jets, from jumbo-headed ideologues spreading messages of hate to coerce workers to stay in line or propaganda aimed to make you feel no empathy for suffering workers in other countries, it's violence all the way down. Violence designed to keep you going to work to reproduce class society, to make you hate anyone who questions why things are like this, to maintain the status quo.

These types of violence are more or less apparent depending on the economic state of society. When times are bad, workers have less to lose questioning the tenants of class society. Sometimes, very rarely, when times are really bad, we actually realize that there is everything to *gain* from this kind of questioning. Wars particularly have a way of shattering the illusions of class society and provoking workers into action, though this very rarely equates to "bringing the war home" in the imperial core.

It radicalizes a certain already progressive strata of the working class by proving to them that without the threat of game-breaking counter-violence against the state and the capitalists, you'll just be allowed to protest every weekend and very little will change.

The first task of any revolution is to abolish the threat of both forms of violence once and for all. We've spoken about this at black mold before, but the general idea is not an outright confrontation with the capitalist state. That is a losing strategy. The goal needs to be to somehow dissolve the social bonds that keep these structures of violence in place. It's really only from this starting point that the social relations of socialism can be born.

"So okay edgelord," we hear you saying. "You sit there in your little Marxist ivory tower looking down on the simpletons and their anti-war protests, banging on about a class war as the only real option like the old man yelling at the cloud. What's the alternative?"

THE ALTERNATIVE?

Okay, look. Whenever you talk about "what needs to happen in order for real change" you run the risk of coming across like an asshole, so let's get a few things out of the way first.

In no way are we saying that protesting, soft agitation or even (ugh) zine writing are wastes of time. If anyone ever tells you that they're either a cop or someone so far up their own ass they've lost sight of what the non-ass world actually looks like. Even though we're old enough to remember going to anti-war protests for Afghanistan and Iraq and Sudan and living through some of the largest single day protests in human history, only to see those demands amount to jack shit and the blood sacrifices to capital continue unabated, protests, for example, do serve a very real function. They cohere groups of agitators together and form social bonds that, without this level of practice, would otherwise go formless. Think back to your own radicalization. It didn't just happen sitting at a computer, it almost certainly happened seeing hundreds or thousands of people like you in the streets demanding something better. This soft-questioning

of the power of capital may not have everyone alongside you demanding a system of cascading communist workers' councils, but they do shift the window to the left, making it clear that you are not alone in your alienation.

But, realistically, as we've seen with Israel and the west's 75+ year war of ethnic cleansing in Palestine and the massive attendant protests around the world in the last two years, very little changes unless it is forced to change. Protests, for all their cohesive action, do not actually break the rules of the game. They question it, sure, and they lead more and more people to realize that wars and genocides aren't aberrations of the capitalist system but inherent parts of it, but that doesn't stop the slaughter.

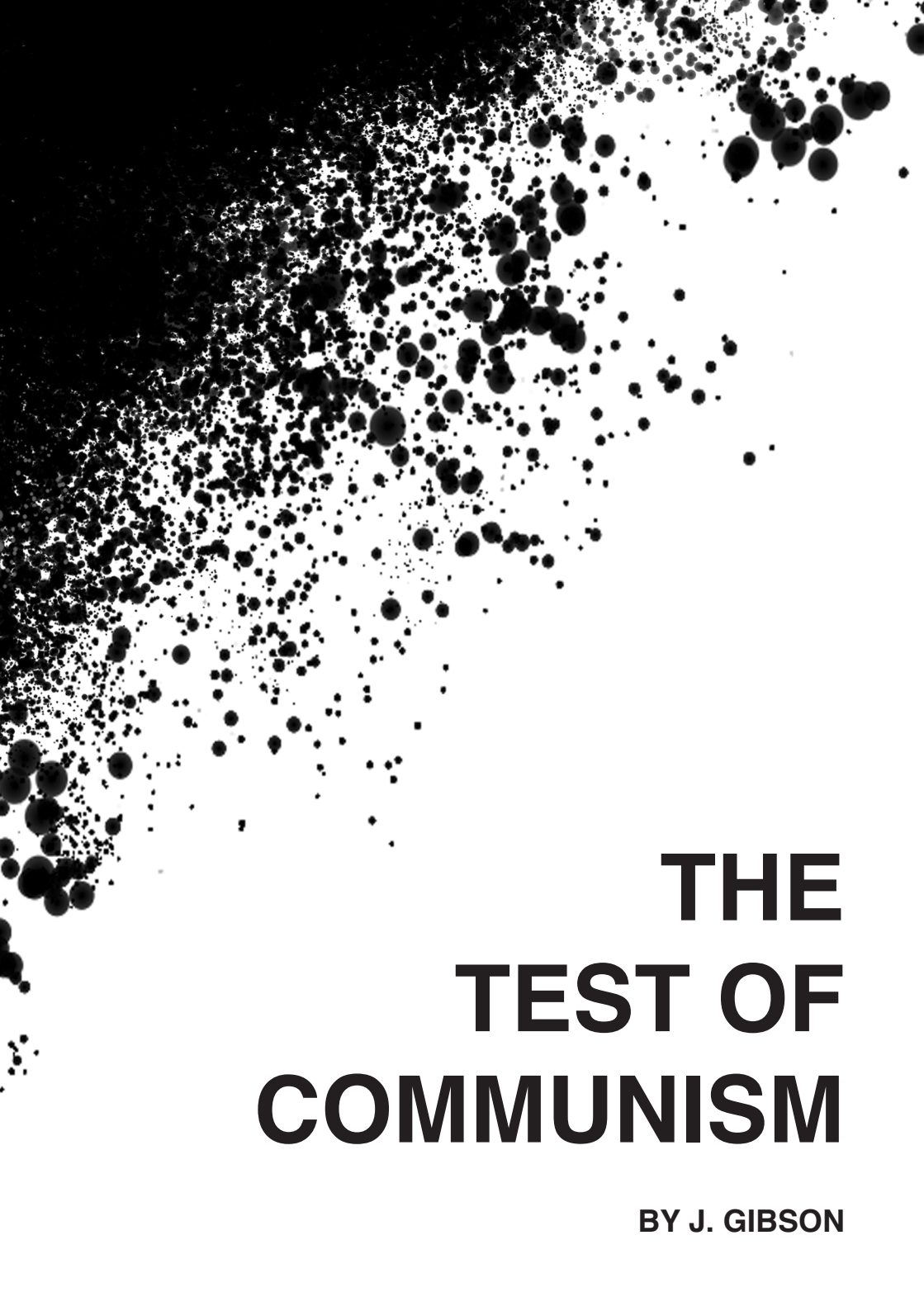
If we go back to Miliband's definition of Marxist conflict, we see exactly this. The fundamental contradictions and misfortunes of capitalist society - exchange value vs. use value, private property, alienated labor, etc. - are all states of "...domination and subjection to be ended by a total transformation of the conditions which gave rise to it."⁸ Of course, this doesn't mean don't try and attenuate the worst epiphenomena of capitalist society as best you can. It's simply an acknowledgment that until enough workers see capitalist social relations for what they are - the driving force behind war, economic crisis, inequality and ecological collapse - and feel they must act against them, this fundamental conflict will persist.

So what of our earlier definition of a socialist politics? *A collective act performed at the class level through which a Marxist theory of conflict plays itself out.* Hopefully by now it should be obvious where this essay is headed. The key to having a really socialist politics capable of transforming the world is, frustratingly, the collective part of that sentence. No one is capable of changing the world and ripping apart class society once and for all on their own. No one act is going to cause the ruling class to throw up its hands and go "damn we were wrong huh?" This is a deeply impersonal system in which production decisions (and thus political decisions) are not made by some entrepreneurial set of capitalists or enlightened politicians. These decisions are all made by capital, by self-expanding val-

8. Ibid.

ue, and the only rule of the game is to keep accumulating. So as the game starts nearing its end in one way or another, as our ecology collapses, profit rates tumble and more and more capitalists seek refuge in outright frau-, uh, I mean finance, collective action is a necessity.

The point of action now becomes the shattering of this hyperindividualist political facade that hangs over all parts of capitalist society, mystifying and obscuring its core tenants, and doing this in a way that insights purposeful action...before the whole thing collapses on its own into a mess of directionless chaos.



THE TEST OF COMMUNISM

BY J. GIBSON

Of the Jews in olden times building the walls of Jerusalem it is said that they fought sword in one hand, trowel in the other. Here, differently, sword and trowel are one. Establishing the organization of production is the strongest, nay, the only lasting weapon to destroy capitalism.

—Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*

The most lucid explication of communization yet!

There's a sentence that will mean different things to different people. Some of you will read it as sarcastic; that's me being snide, looking down on those infantile ultraleftists with their silly dreams of wanting communism sooner rather than later. The rest of you will be excited by the promise of a lucid communization. After all, there have been many less than lucid attempts at what is an otherwise attractive flavor of leftism. Communization has, to me at least, always been very tempting. It is a welcome attempt to break with orthodoxies that have plagued the left as we've been dragged out of the failed 20th century and into unfamiliar political terrain. But for me, there's always a specific moment where communization stumbles. This stumbling usually happens when its theoreticians begin to speculate about what communism actually is. They're usually so concerned with detaching themselves from the failures of the 20th century that they rarely attempt a concrete how (that is, how we would get to communism) or even a what (what communism actually is). To Bernes' credit, he jumps in and gives us a what and a how, which is more than many other communization texts we've seen, and in a lot of ways is very compelling

So when I say that Jasper Bernes' new book *The Future of Revolution* is the most lucid explication of communization yet, I mean it with respect. Bernes has delivered a book that attempts a theory of the future of our revolutionary project that feels pertinent to our time. How often can a modern work of revolutionary Marxism say that? His writing on the eternal nature of the council and even his prescriptions for a political project today are very welcome. But in spite of its achievements, there are still some concerns I had regarding just what this future communist soci-

ety is and how it could create a “self-reflexive” and stable classless society.

THE ETERNAL COUNCIL

Bernes splits this book into three main parts: a study of the history and practice of the worker’s council, an outline of the so-called test of communism, and finally an application of these ideas to our modern situation.

At the very beginning of the book, in the introduction, Bernes claims that

The powerful but now defeated communist movement of the twentieth century mostly rearranged nineteenth-century ideas and forms, Marxism among them. The party, the union, the commune; the uprising, the insurrection, the revolution; the strike, sabotage, seizure; anarchism, socialism, communism—all of this is from the nineteenth century. What is new is only the workers’ council, the soviet, born in 1905 in Russia from the fires of the mass strike. Everything else has been more or less invariant since the late nineteenth century.¹

Clearly, Bernes, coming out of the broader ultraleft milieu, has a healthy respect for the council. To him, the council is salient because it’s what he calls a “revolutionary example,” “an idea embedded in practice, an idea with a future, an idea that premises, through its own generalization, to usher in communism.”² Defined this way, it would be easy to slip into a theory of councils as being any number of forms or actions, but Bernes is able to salvage the council for the modern world by explaining what it is that makes a revolutionary organization explicitly communist.

Bernes recognizes that councils and communes have been and will be formed in a variety of ways under a variety of conditions, but there are several things that must remain eternal to their organization if they wish to succeed. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, they must destroy and replace the armed power of the state with a mass arming of the peo-

1. Jasper Bernes (2025). *The Future of Revolution*, 1.

2. *Ibid*, 2.

ple. This will surely involve violence, as Bernes concedes, but it's much more a question of dissolving the bonds that hold the armed apparatuses of the state together than an outright, direct confrontation, which any revolutionary movement would be bound to lose. Next, they must evolve beyond their original purpose of organizing a mass strike or occupation and move towards revolution and total societal reorganization.

No longer the expression of a unanimous negation, the councils must socialize wealth and directly organize social reproduction. They must now become a unanimous affirmation of a common plan, voluntarily assented to by the freely associated councils, by way of revocable, mandated delegates.³

This turns out to be quite a bit harder than one might think, as Bernes notes that “no workers’ councils have successfully negotiated this transition—from instrument of the mass strike and insurrection to instrument of socialization.”⁴ This brings us to the final criteria for a successful council/commune, namely that they do communist things in an effort to bring about communism.

Ah sweet.

It's worth noting that Bernes rightly believes that these criteria can only take place within a radically democratic structure. Taking from Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, namely that the commune was “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor,”⁵ Bernes sees this democratic structure (all public officials, if that's the right word for them, are elected, given a mandate and are immediately recallable, etc.) as a necessity for proletarian revolution. This is the only way to ensure that the revolution stays for the proletariat, by making it of the proletariat. Put like that, it seems like a truism, but we have seen many different forms of communist paternalism where some form of domineering vanguard structure places itself in the

3. Ibid, 42.

4. Ibid, 42.

5. Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*.

position to lead, not be led, thus setting itself up to be sapped of its radical character during the revolutionary process.

THIS WILL BE ON THE TEST

Bernes takes us from this insightful analysis of the council and the commune to what is to me the meat of this book: the second section titled The Test of Communism.

Bernes spends a short while engaging with Marx’s value theory before applying this to various councilist and councilist-adjacent theories of revolution. Despite much hay being made in communist circles about using the law of value as a test to see if a society is communist or not, Bernes recognizes that this is a necessary but not sufficient analysis. It’s worth pausing, however, to say that while the test of value is a useful one, it hides what’s really going on. The reason these societies have/don’t have the law of value operating is because of their base social relations. Capitalism requires the law of value to operate because it has private ownership of the means of production with private firms producing predominantly for exchange. Communism has no need for the law of value because the means of production have come into common ownership of all society, and thus production is ruled not by competition based on efficiency, but by a common plan. Therefore the law of value is a kind of canary in the coal mine for a society’s social relations.

But I’ve often appreciated this type of negative analysis as a simple way to plot out communist social relations. One can see in capitalist relations the inverse of many base elements of communist ones. Something like this:

Capitalist society	Communist society
Private ownership of m.o.p.	Communal ownership of m.o.p.
Production for exchange	Production for use
Indirectly social labor	Directly social labor

But, and here's where Bernes is correct, this isn't enough for an autopoietic society. A communist society surely isn't just bizarre capitalism. It must have a positive content. We'll return to this.

Bernes spends most of this section grappling with the communist proposals put forward by Jan Appel and the Group of International Communists (GIC) in their work *The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* which were in turn inspired directly by Marx (specifically in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*). The ultraleft has an incredibly poor record of critique when it comes to the GIC. Giles Dauve inspired a whole generation of communizers to mistrust the GIC's plan for communism by claiming that it somehow retained the law of value. But thankfully, Bernes is able to recognize the absurdity of this claim (that somehow counting labor hours is equal to the law of value), but is able to agree with Dauve that it is not viable by claiming that despite these proposals passing the test of value, they still fail the positive test of communism.

Drawing from Amadeo Bordiga, Bernes is able to recognize that communism is more than just this negative, bizarre capitalism.

One of my primary objectives in this essay is to demonstrate that the test of value is not the test of communism and that the confusion between the two fundamentally occludes the tasks of communism. There is a gap between the two tests, and the power of Bordiga's critique is not, as it imagines, that it locates value in these various post-capitalist scenarios *but that it formulates what must be done to produce communism once and as value has been abolished*. Both Appel and Bordiga confuse the two tests, with Appel concluding that because his scenario has passed the test of value it has therefore passed the test of communism, and Bordiga concluding that because it has not passed the test of communism it has therefore not passed the test of value.⁶ (emphasis mine)

6. Jasper Bernes (2025). *The Future of Revolution*, 109.

It's very easy to get caught up in abstractions when we're spit-balling about a future classless society. I do this quite a bit by picturing societies that, once they've gotten rid of private property, will just kinda figure things out. Figure out the base and the superstructure will follow, you dig? And to a certain extent this is true. What is most important about planning for communism is understanding just what communism is, and to me, the answer to that question is the same as what it would be for any other mode of production: an outline of its social relations. And this is why I find the proposals of Marx and the GIC to be so compelling. They outlined the bare bones, the basic political economy a communist society will need to follow to ensure communal property relations don't just slip back to capitalist ones. But this is also (and to a certain extent the members of the GIC openly admit this) its fault.

It's all well and good to say that private property needs to be abolished and that we can measure the extent to which this has happened by falling back on the negative test of value, but that doesn't actually create a fully viable, autopoietic society. The GIC imagines this all working through a cascading system of councils, which, okay, that's like saying a roller coaster will work using electricity. Where does this electricity come from? How is it actually channeled into making the ride work?

But Bernes takes this critique too far by falling back on a mistake as old as the dream communism itself. In attempting to get past what Marx calls the bourgeois right of the lower stage of communism, he advocates for immediate communization, or "the immediate production of communist relations."⁷ But what he means by this is not simply the immediate production of communist social relations (which is of course, correct, and one of the reasons communization is so valuable) so much as the immediate jump to higher stage communism, where society operates on the basis of from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. These are two completely different things.

BOURGEOIS RIGHT

One of the most important documents written by Marx was the Critique

7. Ibid, 110.

of the Gotha Program (CotGP), and it is perhaps the most pertinent to this discussion. In it, Marx spends a brief section explaining why it is that early stage communism must retain this flaw known as bourgeois right. What bourgeois right means in this context is an early communist society where consumption is still tied in some fashion to your ability to labor; “one worker is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time.”⁸

And so it is in the GIC’s proposal. If you labor for eight hours you have access to eight hours of social labor. Some people are more able-bodied or will just want to work more (it remains unclear why some of you are like this) and so can draw more from society’s stock of social labor. But for Marx, and myself, this is an inevitable and necessary flaw in early stage communism. Marx explains why.

But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society. *Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.*

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- *only then then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety* and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!⁹ (emphasis mine)

It is telling that Bernes does not engage with this section of the CotGP in this book. What Marx is saying is that there are ~4 things, mas-

8. Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program.

9. Ibid.

sive things, that need to change before you can get to the work as much as you want, take what you will phase of communism. These are:

1. The destruction of the subordination of the individual to the division of labor
 - a. Additionally, the dissolution of the divide between mental and physical labor
2. The complete blurring of the divide between work and leisure (or perhaps hobbies is a better word here)
3. A qualitative development of the productive forces including the all-around development of the individual
4. A mass increase in total social wealth

I repeat them in this fashion to emphasize just how specific and epoch-defining these changes are. The reasons Marx believed we would need to tick these tasks off our communist development list before everyone can take as needed are manifold. For instance, the only one of these tasks that Bernes properly engages with - an increase in social wealth - is quite complicated. What would we define as an acceptable level of social wealth? Social wealth is hugely unequal across the globe, and would take time, though perhaps not as much as our Leninist friends like it imagine, to properly develop and distribute.

Others on this list are nearly unimaginable to us today. Labor becoming life's prime want? In an alienated society where working conditions are so poor and competitive, this is very hard to imagine. However, I don't mean to say it's impossible, or even that it will be a carrot dangling on a stick across the eternity of lower stage communism. It will certainly happen at some point, just not immediately. To me, the way labor becoming life's prime want occurs is with the onset of directly social labor and radical democracy, both of which are an outgrowth of communist social relations. When we get up and go to work today, we are completely unable to visualize what we are actually doing - namely, reproducing society together in various ways. This is because our labor is not directly recognized as social. We are in constant competition with other workers and our labor processes are governed by efficiency at all costs. Production

rules us and is an alienated body that lords over all we do. Once our labor is directly social and we have a say in ruling production we will be able to recognize that all our little jobs, from stocking shelves to making shoes to picking apples to keeping records of productive activities, contribute to something greater: the society we have collectively decided to create. Why then shouldn't we consider labor becoming life's prime want? Once this massive technical apparatus becomes transparent and directed towards what we collectively decide we want it to do (from building an ecological society to, I don't know, exploring the solar system) it would feel good to contribute in our small ways.

And perhaps this is the rub with Bernes' view of immediate communization and my broader gripe with communization and ultraleft currents in general. Communization comes so close to getting it. Its insights into the 20th century workers' movements and their perhaps less than viable applications today are incredibly valuable, and the idea that we need communism from day one of the revolution is exactly correct. But communism is not its superstructure. It is not its planning mechanisms nor its labor assignment protocols. It is its social relations: how we all relate to one another. Lower stage communism is communism not because bourgeois right is just something we all have to suck up and deal with, but because it has the social relations of communism. Just like higher stage communism. What changes are the development of the productive forces (which of course continues under communism, especially in the early days of subsumption), our total wealth, our philosophies towards work and our individual (and thus societal) development.

Bernes is correct to say that the GIC proposals do not pass the smell test, if by smell test we mean the establishment of a viable communist society, but he is incorrect to say it is not communism. Communism is its social relations, which must be changed as early as possible in the revolution, for that's exactly what will make our struggles viable. But, and this is perhaps a controversial thing to say, one could very easily imagine a non-viable communism that retains communist social relations. I believe on paper this is what the GIC is. It is necessary but in no way sufficient. A stable communism will require, as Bernes says, democratic

planning mechanisms capable of producing for the common plan, plans for the destruction of the divide between town and country, a sustainable agricultural plan and many other things. But without the framework of Marx and the GIC, we will be unable to retain a viable political economy in communism, higher or lower. To put it another way, we won't have communism at all, because our relationships to each other will have no way to regulate themselves.

WORK AND CONSUMPTION

Bernes is, like many ultraleftists, suspicious of creating a link between work and consumption.

When you certificate food, housing, and other necessities, you create needless individualism, fragmenting consumption, you establish an explicit social judgment about those who can work and those who cannot, those who give their labors and those who take from the social store without contributing (because they are children, disabled, elderly). But who can make such a judgment? And are we sure that these individuals do not contribute to reproduction in ways that are simply unmeasured?¹⁰

Ugh. This is recreating the same issue that Marx critiqued in the CotGP, and it is confusing society deciding to establish commie welfare for those who cannot (or just don't) work with a moral judgement. Again, part of the subsumption of capitalism is a corroding of these prejudices. If we are all able to recognize that we are recreating a better society together because our labor has been de-alienated, there would be no reason to judge people in this way. Additionally, Marx and the GIC's plan for labor-time certificates simply provides a method of accounting for our labor. What we decide to do with it would be up to us. I'm a firm believer, for example, that right off the bat all the essentials of communist life need to be made free at the point of use. What I mean by that is establishing cafeterias, housing, childcare, etc. that are all paid for via the GIC's "tax on the working hour", whereby goods and services like this are accounted

10. Jasper Bernes (2025). *The Future of Revolution*, 126.

for by adjusting the return on an hour of labor. By doing this, all fears of compulsion would cease, because if you just want to vibe out and go for hikes or surf all day you could do so without fear of being denied what you need to survive. There would always be food and shelter available for you simply because you are a human with a right to exist. Will this create a world where nobody works? No, of course not. Get that bourgeois nonsense out of your head. People will still recognize that labor is necessary for a functioning society, even more so as communist society develops.

But getting back to my point, democratically creating a tie between work and consumption is necessary before we get those lofty achievements of high stage communism because our society and individual psyches are still developing to overcome the distinction between work and leisure. But this is not the violent compulsion of Lenin, Stalin or Trotsky, which is still firmly enmeshed as a brainworm of many modern day “communists”. Trotsky, for example, spoke of a militarized labor force under the direction of totalitarian top-down planners.

We are now heading towards the type of labour that is socially regulated on the basis of an economic plan, obligatory for the whole country, compulsory for every worker. This is the basis of socialism...The militarization of labour, in this fundamental meaning of which I have spoken, is the indispensable, basic method for the organization of our labour forces.¹¹

This is obviously absurd, and putting aside the moral depravity of such a system, it could hardly be called communist or even viable (as it turns out, it was not). But to conflate Marx and the GIC's scheme to be a compulsion of the same type would just be an error. If it could even be called such, this is a compulsion that is finally under the control of all society, and one that can be democratically adjusted. One could easily imagine this link between work and consumption to operate side by side with a society in which all essentials are supplied free at the point of use - free housing, free food, etc. But it is the system of the GIC that gives us

11. Quoted in Isaac Deutscher (1950). *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Place in Soviet Labour Policy*, 1950.

the tools necessary to account in this way, and to work towards higher stage communism. This transition from lower stage to higher stage may be surprisingly quick. It may be longer than expected. It may even be decided that for whatever reason our future communist society decides that getting there 100% is not what it wants. I don't believe there is a way to know how long it will take, and any prescriptions on that topic will just be suggestions, as it will be up to our future commies to decide.

But lower stage communism remains a vital step that cannot be ignored for the reasons outlined by Marx in the CotGP. If we do ignore it, we fall back on rationing councils who decide what workers get what, instead of tying consumption, at first, to labor. This is much less stable than a system of labor certificates, and that should be obvious. The communizer fear of lower stage communism is an understandable one, but any kind of attempt to do without it will lead to a society where opposing interests will play out violently, and more than likely just collapse back into a more stable society (capitalism). Despite what we may like, communism will have to subsume capitalist society in all places where its rot has penetrated: in our productive apparatuses, in our philosophies and in our individuality. And that process of subsumption is nothing less than the transition from lower to higher stage communism. But importantly, the social relations remain, from the very beginning, once the means of production have been brought into the common ownership of society, communist.

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Bernes' book is perhaps the best explication of communization yet. It raises incredibly important points about the development of communism independent of the destruction of the law of value (which we should perhaps more rightly name as the destruction of private property and its replacement with communal ownership of the means of production). But this negative test of value is, as he says, not enough to create a viable society. But the answer to this is not to skip straight to high communism. The answer is to begin designing these additional superstructural systems now to shorten the time it takes to get to this high stage. It is to build plan-

ning software, to design viable agricultural and industrial systems and it is to create connections between workers movements that presage the coming revolution.

Postscript - 11.07.26

Subsumption Addendum

After re-reading that review, I thought it might be worthwhile to add a few more words on the idea of subsumption, both as it relates to the development of a classless society and to communist strategy.

When we look back on the subsumption of let's-just-call-it-feudalism by capitalism, there are a few things to note. At first, capitalism, this new set of social relations defined by alienated labor, production for exchange and private property, was forced to make do with what it inherited from feudalism. What it inherited was a productive apparatus geared much more towards the productivity of land than the productivity of labor. This affected the ways in which production was practiced in a myriad of ways. It became clear during this transition that typical peasant family farms with their three-field rotations and commons were simply not as productive as specialized, enclosed spaces owned privately and worked by wage laborers. In the case of England, the entire character of production changed abruptly, and huge numbers of newly proletarianized laborers were thrown off their land and into a deadly labor market.

The most common type of subsumption that is discussed during this period of transition to capitalism is that of the formal and real subsumption of labor. At first, while capitalists were making do with what they had inherited from feudalism, they enhanced the productivity of labor in absolute ways: they forced workers to produce more commodities by lengthening the working day, making them work harder under the threat of violence and, frequently, just paying them the absolute bare minimum (or even below a replacement level wage). However, as capitalist social relations became more and more engrained in society, the process of the real subsumption of labor began. This real subsumption saw cap-

italism begin to create social structures and methods of production that were completely unique to it. This meant that capital now began extracting surplus value in a relative manner. This meant instituting labor saving technologies that produced more commodities in the same amount of time (the steam engine, the cotton gin, etc.) and production design systems like Taylorism or the Fordist assembly line.

The reason I'm bringing all this up is to point out that this period of transition between modes involved quite a bit more than the formal and real subsumption of labor. These changes to the labor process are what we talk about the most in the transition debates because they are the most definitionally capitalist processes. They let us create loose time-frames for when we did not have capitalism, when we did and when there was a bit of a gray area. But we have to dig a bit deeper to see all the things that had to change to create a functioning capitalist mode of production. In order to have capitalism, you needed to institute the basic social relation: capitalist and proletariat. However, that's not enough to have an autopoietic society.

During the very early days of the formal subsumption of labor, proles were dying off faster than they were reproducing. Capitalists had not quite realized yet that you did in fact need to pay a wage that ensured social reproduction in order to have a functioning workforce, and there are all sorts of horror stories about the factories of industrial Manchester or Huddersfield or the wandering, emaciated vagabonds even earlier in the immediate aftermath of the enclosures. At its core, then, the subsumption of a mode of production was about not just building new social relations, but also about building the necessary structures that are epiphenomenal to those relations that ensure their reproduction: capitalist states, capitalist police, capitalist housing for workers, capitalist banks, capitalist food systems...

But it's also quite a bit more than even that, because proles needed to accept themselves as proles. This necessitated the violent (and ongoing) crushing of many proletarian revolts not just in Europe but all over the world as capitalist social relations spread. This was, as we've just said, a

question of force, but it was also a psychological and even philosophical question. Several generations needed to pass before proles forgot that there was the possibility of organizing society along different lines. They had to be born as workers, raised as workers and not ask any questions. The capitalist world needed to seem natural.

Whole cities had to be designed and built, some, like Paris, demolished completely and redesigned in a fashion that better suited not the windmills, palaces and small-holdings of feudalism, but the large “stack-a-prole” tenements of New York or industrial ports of Liverpool and Shanghai. Capitalist transportation systems needed to be designed and built to transport proles to work, capitalist media needed to be created to enforce consent, new gender relations and performances adapted... the list goes on and on.

But all of these changes, many of which are still being molded in various ways, stemmed from the original adoption of capitalist social relations. There was a strong degree of force to transition between feudal and capitalist social relations early on. There were of course competing interests at play between not just the oppressed and oppressors but between the different factions of the ruling classes. For our purposes as socialists this should be instructive. Our main goal, above all others, needs to be finding ways to usher in the adoption of new, communal social relations. We need to first study what those are without falling victim to the petty bourgeois socialism-is-just-capitalism-but-planned-and-more-rational mistake made so often in so many different ways. There are ways in which communal property relations would need to be implemented if they are ever going to work, and this is the very core of the coming classless society. We do not mean we need to tell proles exactly how to plan their society or what they should be planning for. What we need to be agitating for is this specific set of social relations that will stop socialism from sliding back into capitalism, as it has done so many times in the past.

When it comes to the subsumption of capitalism by socialism, we need to keep in mind that much will change between what Marx called the low and high stages of communism. Our architecture will change, our

modes of transportation, our factories, our media, our gender relations, our political structures, our art, our psychology and our philosophies. But what will not change during this period is our social relations. It will remain communism from day one. Plenty of cultural changes will continue to precede this coming revolution however, as different strata of the proletariat begin to chafe under the uneven burdens of class society. Recognizing these utopian shifts and developing them towards a communist horizon is, to some degree, the role of the agitator and the organizer. It's only by grasping this broader idea of subsumption that we will ever, I think, begin to have a sound political strategy.

The background of the entire page is a high-contrast, abstract composition of black and white dots and splatters. The dots vary in size, from tiny specks to large, prominent circles. The splatters are irregular, cloud-like shapes of varying density, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of a material or a dynamic, energetic field.

THE OFFICE FOR CONTROL OVER RESULTS

BY DONAL COSTELLO

The Office for Control Over Results is a blog written by Donal Costello, an Irish process control director for a factory producing electronic components. Donal has allowed us to reprint several of his essays from his blog to give our readers an introduction to what we might call progressive systems theory or cybernetics. Much of the socialist project has always been based on an abstract reworking of social labor, i.e. the way in which our labor relates to the broader reproduction of society. However, beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, new ways of conceiving of the concrete labor process and its relationship to self-management began to be theorized, perhaps most notably for our purposes by cybernetician Stafford Beer. The questions posed by Beer and others like him were from where does a theory of autonomy originate and how will this change our actual experience of work? For Beer, the answer to the first question was found by studying the variety, or measure of complexity, of a system. For Beer,

Senior Management is in principle unable to entertain the variety generated by any one (never mind all) of its subsidiary viable systems...The beginnings of a theory of autonomy, of de-centralization, lie in this simple fact - rather than in political theory.

I think we here at black mold are adult enough to claim that the beginnings of a theory of autonomy are very much found both in systems and political theory (as well as a theory of morality), but Beer's point is a necessary one. When we talk about the need for a revolutionary transformation of society, what we are referring to is the fact that the productive forces of society have progressed to such an extent that the productive relations of society have begun to hold their further progression back. This is becoming nowhere more evident than in the capitalist organization of the factory, where outdated methods of hierarchical management systems based on the exploitation of labor (ie, class) are holding back efficiency and, more importantly, emancipated, creative and autonomous labor. Donal will explain why in the following essays. We will have a further reading section at the end for those of you who find that this short glimpse into the world of factory design and systems has piqued your

interest.

—the black mold editorial team

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WELCOME TO THE OCR

My name is Donal Costello, I am from Dublin, Ireland. I hold an MSc in Engineering Cybernetics.

I primarily work on the design and implementation of lean production systems, inspired, among others by Stafford Beer and his management cybernetics and by the Toyota Production System (TPS) and its derivatives.

I am currently employed in this capacity by a large multinational manufacturer of domestic electrical components (plugs, sockets, switches of various types, etc).

My intention is to use this blog for three purposes: as a place to gather my own general thoughts, as a place where others can see the kind of work that I personally do, and most importantly, as a place where people can learn about the practicalities of large scale modern production.

Discussion of topics with the following headings is, as of now, my general action plan for this blog:

1. (Standard) time is money
2. The VSM – principles of homeostatic control
3. Why “control over results”?
4. The Toyota Production System (TPS)
5. Implications of modern technology and methods

If you're interested in a clear discussion of how technology, social relationships between individuals and groups, and ‘results control’ come together to regulate complex processes involving thousands of people –

stick around.

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(STANDARD) TIME IS MONEY

We're going to have one post on the economics of production – it won't be boring, and it's essential to understand the context of what automation and process control engineers are trying to achieve.

Let's say you take an economics course – you're going to hear a certain perspective on how the economy works. This perspective emphasizes the moment of sale. You have a product or service to sell (it doesn't matter how – maybe you bought it from someone else, or it fell from the back of a truck!), and bring it to 'the market'. Then the magic moment happens – someone buys it. They have your product, and you have their money. Supply meeting demand is the central fact of the economic process, and everything else is pretty much incidental to this.

The real story of how the economy works is very different. It's not that establishing the nature of in-demand products is unimportant (it is of course essential), but rather that this moment of sale is, from the perspective of a real producer, just a point on a continuum, which is neither more or less important than every other moment. By the end of this piece, I hope this will be clear.

Examination of a big company makes this point very obvious, because unlike a small company, it has clearly defined departments, which specialise in the different aspects of its operations. If you look at the organisational chart of such an enterprise, you will find a whole bunch of sections. Some of these are related to buying and selling – like supply chain management, procurement and customer satisfaction. Some are focused on production and the products, like research and development, process control and automation, and then you've got financial and management accounting, and finally auxiliary departments like real estate management, human resources, the legal office, and so on.

The company basically performs the role of a social-technical-economic control system, with one overriding aim in mind. This control system is operationalised, at the highest level of recursion, through financial accounting. The primary function of financial accounting is measuring the monetary flows of output, a 'profit and loss account', and the stock of capital (a 'balance sheet'), at a moment in time, to enable the owners, the shareholders, to calculate how profitable the company is, and to hold management accountable for this.

The same financial accounting principles and practices apply to all companies. They all must use them in order to obtain investment from the rest of the economy (the use of a standardised, objective metric like this for systematic regulation of the operation of a system is called 'results control' – which will be a common theme on this blog). An enterprise's Return on Investment (ROI) is the metric in this case – it is how investors and creditors hold management accountable for the capital and profit/loss positions of the firm.

All companies are held to account using this kind of results control, because the kinds of market portfolios which investors use are weighted shares of many companies. Investors and creditors demand a certain rate of return, adjusted for risk and other 'compensating' factors. Financial accountants know this as the 'required return'. This rate of return is consciously calculated in advance to reflect expected differences in rates of profitability over different time-frames, for different kinds of businesses. The econ-101 idealisation of bringing products to the market and hoping that they sell doesn't enter investor's minds at this level of abstraction – the big picture is worked out well in advance, with the risk-compensating adjustments built in.

These 'required returns' pose a practical problem for the boards of directors of companies – somehow you have to ensure that they are met. Those directors solve this problem by imposing (accounting) results control in turn onto their own firm. Management does this with the help of management accountants, who need to make clear the position of the company internally in terms of its ability to deliver profitability.

I mentioned earlier that the financial PL and balance sheets are calculated for a moment in time. The internal accounting results-control by contrast, as we will see, need to be continuous. In the same sense that if we want to drive to a destination, our 'internal' control over the car speed and direction must be continuous for the whole journey in order to get there.

Internal firm control system

Now another practical problem arises, and this is where it gets really interesting, because in order to realise the profit that the company is tasked with generating at the end of the process, the accountants need to describe the production process internal to the company in that same unit of account that the profit is described in – money. This is despite the fact that money plays no role within the company itself. Different departments internal to the company do not sell services to each other, and the workers and managers on production lines do not deal with money during their working day – they deal with time and quantities of product.

The depreciation of fixed assets can be dealt with simply in terms of replacement cost accounting, where asset values are described in terms of what it would currently cost to buy their equivalent and replace them. This gives you an objective basis for comparing the maintenance cost of the machine to the replacement cost, and knowing if you're on track, in this respect, to achieving your required return. But how can the use and waste of materials, and the actual labour processes within the firm be objectively taken into account when figuring out if the company is on track to get the appropriate rate of return?

Management accountants do this by distinguishing between actual costs in the enterprise, and what are called 'standard' costs. Standard cost expresses the use of resources, and labour time (of average skill and intensity of work, at the level of labour productivity called 'standard time' – more on this in a moment) in terms of money. Any real costs over standard costs are treated as a loss. Standard cost is therefore a measure of what the labour process, carried on within the company, should cost, if expressed in terms of money. This controls for the variability in actual

day-to-day labour productivity and sets the benchmark for what would need to happen in order for the company to be profitable. Labour time in the firm is in this way reduced to the same cost unit as materials and capital goods (as accountants call it – ‘absorption costing’).

Because the accountants also track the value which is added to the product during production, the profit which they are charged with quantifying can likewise be found. Profit, strange as it may seem, exists during the entire production process, as a result of tracking the revenue and the costs, within the accounts of the company. Those categories do not just appear out of thin air at the moment in time when financial accounts are issued, detailing money income and expenditure. They are accounted the whole way through the process – which is why management accounting is essential. This means, in effect, that businesses keep two sets of books – one for the outside world and one for themselves.

Engineers with stopwatches

The automation and process control engineers build up a picture of ‘standard time’. This includes several sub-categories – two of the most fundamental of which are ‘useful time’ and ‘design time’. Useful time is that portion of the labour time during which work is actually being carried out on the product. ‘Revenue’ is essentially being created, just in the form of product now, not yet money – but this product is implicitly understood to be worth what our accountants and economists have projected in advance that we will sell it for – a realistic ‘going market price’ – so we speak of ‘UT’ as ‘value adding labour’. Design time is the whole production process including not only work being directly carried out on the product but necessary work that does not directly produce products (like quality inspection). These are additional but unavoidable costs, not adding ‘revenue’.

When the enterprise feels under financial pressure to hit its required ROI, and needs to reduce costs in existing production, or when it wants to start a new production process, engineers go to work. We use detailed studies of the necessary technical and labour inputs, design and ‘value engineering’ studies, observation based on trial runs (as a last re-

sort with video cameras and stopwatches), and work studies. The gold standard is MTM data (which are kind of standardised building blocks of how long it takes an average human to do all kinds of manual tasks). We design and redesign the production processes on the basis of concrete but ideal plans, and then try to reach those ideals in reality (but we never can of course, because there are many kinds of time-wasting that can be reduced in many ways but never eliminated).

By multiplying these standard time measurements by the wage costs of the relevant workers, we arrive at the standard cost of the labour inputs used to make the products – what the management accountants are interested in. So while it is widely understood that process control and automation engineers design production processes, what is less widely known is how this fits into the bigger picture. We organise the technical control system, which fits into both an accounting and financial control system – the results of which are all expressed in terms of money, so we can track these money categories all the way through.

A single system

Companies do of course nervously watch whether their products sell in the market or not – and sometimes make huge blunders in what they produce, or sometimes just get unlucky (think of an event like Covid 19 and what it did to many industries at that time). But companies spend just as much time on their internal processes, and for good reason: The commodities which we make are expressed in terms of their prices before they ever get to the market, as a pre-planned precondition of the process of which sale for money is just one moment. Profit is similarly produced before the outputs go to the market. The form of the profit just subsequently changes from product to money (and later, when reinvested, back into product again). This profit, made in production, can be fully or partially lost during or after production.

So yes, it is of course true that if finished goods are unable to be sold, the company has lost money. Costs outstripping sales is what a ‘loss’ means in terms of accounting profit. But the same phenomenon is recorded at every point in the production and circulation process, sometimes

as accounting profit and sometimes as profit in internal management accounting reports. If products are destroyed during manufacture, it's also a loss in the same sense as the unsold product. If on a production line, we experience 'unscheduled downtime' (the arch-enemy of process control engineers!), we have deviated from our standard time by that much, and this is, in exactly the same sense, a loss – we are paying real, measured money costs for minutes of production during which products were not produced. This is a cost above the standard cost without a corresponding flow of revenue. Or, suppose we successfully sell our products for the full intended money profit, and as a result have a nice big bag of cash, but then this cash is subsequently burned up in a fire before it can be reinvested in new production. This is a loss to the company in the same sense as in the other instances. All are points on a continuum – none are more or less significant than the others.

This blog is about control over the technical and labour process, and now we have put that control system in its proper context. I hope it made you think!

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THE VSM - PRINCIPLES OF HOMEOSTATIC CONTROL

Any YouTube video that you watch on the topic of cybernetics will inform you that the term itself comes from an ancient Greek word for the 'helmsman' of a ship, and that it is a multidisciplinary field focusing on "homeostasis" and "autopoiesis". In other words, in a nutshell cybernetics is the study of systems which modify their own behavior in order to continue to operate viably in their environment, and more than this, that when they don't know how to suitably modify their behavior, they self-organise a discovery process to figure it out.

This, as you can imagine, casts a wide net over a lot of kinds of systems which could potentially exhibit this behavior to some extent. Some of the most obvious ones are biological systems like ourselves. But technical (mechanical, electronic, informational etc) systems also have strong cybernetic elements today, through self-diagnosis and self-correction

subsystems, although not of course at the level of sophistication found in biology. This kind of ‘engineering cybernetics’ is what I myself studied in university.

But a different focal point in cybernetics is our topic of interest here – that being management cybernetics, the explicit recognition of organisations as socio-technical systems conforming to the same rules which apply in principle to all cybernetic systems. Stafford Beer was, in the western world, the great pioneer of management cybernetics (I say in the ‘western’ world, because others were developing similar ideas, which had a greater overall influence, at the same time in Japan, and we’ll consider that in a future piece).

Beer’s great work was the Viable System Model (VSM). The VSM is still quite influential today, and this is a testament to Beer’s achievement. I can personally attest to the fact that Fortune 500 companies are using the Viable System Model in its unaltered form, because there is simply no better way of cutting through the pathologies which exist in any organisation and showing the true state of how all of the essential parts of a production system actually work.

Wikipedia has a reasonably good and brief explainer for the VSM. My even more condensed explanation for our purposes is that any viable system, be it the human body, a social organisation or anything else that exhibits cybernetic properties, can be represented by the VSM. In other words, the VSM is a visual mapping of the elements which every cybernetic system has (rather than an idealisation of what the system should have). If it is a functional cybernetic system then it does in fact have these components, although they may not be organised optimally.

Also, as a visualisation, the VSM only captures a specific system in focus. In management cybernetics therefore you might just be interested in looking at one company as a viable system (and it will be the ‘system in focus’), or a whole town, or an industrial sector, etc.

The VSM shows the active elements of the system, along with the

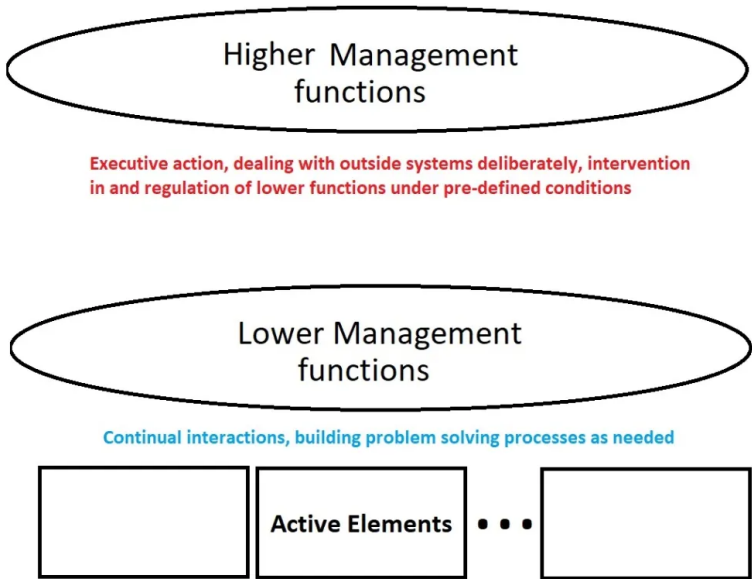
regulators of those active elements. If your system in focus is a company, and within that company there are offices in which work is being done, these offices are the active elements – called the ‘system 1s’. The lower management functions (systems 2,3) are the automatic regulators for the system 1s. For example if the accounting department notices an error in their work, they have a local process to go about resolving it. If a computer isn’t working correctly, there is an IT specialist who can remotely fix it for them. There’s no need for higher management functions to enter into the equation here.

Higher management functions in principle do not interfere in, and are not even aware of, lower management functions’ specific activities, unless a certain predefined threshold of importance is reached, and then they absolutely must become involved.

These higher management functions (systems 4,5) do a lot of the conscious, deliberate, not strictly reactive work of the system. Things like conscious, non-routine interactions with the external (in this case, business) environment, planning the direction of the system and establishing global goals and criteria for the whole system. They receive only the most important, highly filtered information from the lower levels, and use this information to make executive decisions, including the normalisation of any problems which arise in the system when its lower management functions are unable to resolve them.

So basically, you can think of the VSM as a set of roles, or functions. These are roles that must be performed by the organisation, but there is nothing fixed in stone about how exactly they are organised – which is a feature, not a bug. In management cybernetics, homeostasis is sought as the ideal type of control. Here we are interested in self-correcting behaviour and the self-organising of solutions to maintain stability in the face of a changing environment. This type of control is regarded as infinitely superior to top-down control, because it involves the entire system in the problem-solving effort, and thus there is no sense in which the higher management functions are more important than the lower management functions and active elements. Each role is equally critical, and

each shapes the development of the system organically – something that can seem quite unsettling for some managers who would like to imagine only themselves as defining how the organisation works.



To wrap up our introductory explainer, we need to emphasise the issue of ‘requisite variety’. A company using a homeostatic control system as we have briefly discussed must ensure that only the right information is going where it needs to go, because the bandwidth of any element of the system is quite limited. Higher and lower management functions must not be cognisant of all information happening within the system 1s, but only that which rises to the level of a problem (or initiative) suitable to their level of responsibility for normalisation (or implementation). So one of the very important elements of designing a socio-technical control system for your organisation is the clear demarcation of under which circumstances different elements of the system must intervene and assume responsibility, as this defines what information will be allowed to pass through the filters between management elements and reach higher levels.

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WHY “CONTROL OVER RESULTS”?

I realise that describing my blog as being concerned with “control over results” may seem like a pretentious way of saying that it concerns “management”. So I want to promise you now at the outset that no, this blog is not a conspiracy to waste your time. What is almost always meant when organisation speaks about “management” or “to manage” something is a catastrophic concept that I wouldn’t want to be associated with.

If you have not read my previous post on the VSM, I want to re-iterate that in any organisation:

System 1s are the active elements carrying out the real purpose of the organisation (eg an assembly line in a factory).

Lower Management functions are concerned with continual interactions with system 1s, building problem solving processes as needed locally.

Higher Management functions are concerned with executive action, dealing with outside systems consciously/deliberately, intervention in and regulation of lower management functions under pre-defined conditions.

Cybernetic ‘results control’ is distinguished from ‘bureaucratic control’ in the following sense.

Bureaucratic control is control over an organization by processes to which the decisions of higher management functions are the ‘inputs’ to the control system. A bureaucracy, seen in this light, is nothing other than the higher management functions controlling the active elements (system 1s) directly. Special groups for this purpose deal only with the variety of situations that are prescribed by the higher management functions, and handle them in a pre-determined way, with each special department dealing with a particular class of issue. Issues that fall outside of those responsibilities are not catered for by the organisation at all. Bureaucratic control is therefore a static and discrete-time controller, es-

established and perhaps periodically modified somewhat, acting out the instructions of the organisation's higher management functions.

Results control on the other hand can be thought of as control over the organization by processes to which (especially) system 1 process results are the 'inputs' to the control system. This is a fundamental aspect of cybernetic (homeostasis-seeking) control. Results control seeks a situation in which any amount of variety can be handled. It is a dynamic and continuous controller, because whatever issues emerge in the system 1s, it leads to someone having managerial responsibility to create a process/solution for this issue. The role of management functions (higher and lower) in a cybernetic / results-oriented control system reduces to (1) definition of the conditions under which the given managerial functions become actively involved, and (2) specific actions to take in each type of case where they have had to become involved.

While in results control, many management responses will become standardised in the main categories of issues which continually arise, this is altogether different to the higher management functions prescribing in advance what kinds of issues the system 1s are permitted to deal with, as in bureaucratic management.

Let's consider the example of a production line in a factory, to clarify what all this means in practice.

A bureaucratic control system applied here would be when the higher management functions of the factory view the improvement of the productivity of the system 1 element here (the production line) as a technical problem which they will solve. A special group of people will be convened by the given higher management function, and they will figure out ways, within pre-defined limits, of increasing the work intensity on the line, for example through financial inducements and punishments. The measurement tools which are often used here are physical output, working time, survey data and so on. Again it is a static set of arrangements which acts directly on behalf of higher management.

A cybernetic oriented system would work very differently. Firstly, the control system is based on process results, so you have to choose what you measure in order to gain more insight into how this production line can operate without the deeply unhelpful involvement of bureaucracies. Suppose that a system exists whereby the operators on this line can declare whenever they finish a batch of products they made, and in what window of time they did this work. Allowing only for this, consider some simple measures that we can now use:

1. Operator Time (OT): This is just the amount of time that the operators on the production line described themselves as working on the completion of a given quantity of product. Typically therefore it might be 'from 9am until a break at 11am', and the output might be 100 units of product. If there are 3 operators on the production line, then OT in this case will be $2 \text{ hours} \times 3 = 6 \text{ hours}$.
2. Actual Production (AP): The quantity of produced product during the OT, 100 units in this case.
3. Design Time (DT): The amount of time in which, using the current production methods, under normal production conditions, assuming an averagely skilled operator working at a reasonably relaxed pace, that the production process can finish 1 unit of product. (In reality this is made using a weighted average, because there is not always a linear relationship between time and output quantity).
4. Standard Time (ST): $AP \times DT$. The amount of time it should have taken to make the 'Actual Production' quantity of product, given DT.
5. Plan Production Quantity (PPQ): OT / DT . The amount of product that should have been made, given the operator time (OT) on the production line.
6. Efficiency Coefficient (EC): ST / OT . The relationship between the operator time on the production line, and the amount of time that should have been spent on the production line, given the production result.

When the operators on the production line record a new production batch of some number of units as having been completed, the quantity that should have been made in that time is already known (PPQ). This can be compared directly to the factual quantity that was made (AP).

Simultaneously, we learn the amount of time that it should have taken to produce the production result and also the factual amount of time that was taken (ST and OT respectively). These can be compared directly, which is called the Efficiency Coefficient (EC). It is advantageous to an operator to clock up more OT (as salaries are generally paid for the amount of clocked-in hours), but this higher OT requires correspondingly higher output during the working time, or else the EC will be seen to fall.

To the extent that $OT > ST$, this is known as “red time”. Red time begins life as “unclassified red time”, a given amount of time that for some reason did not result in the production outcome that we had hoped for. Classifying red time means explaining it qualitatively (e.g. “we were waiting for parts to arrive from the warehouse”). This act of explaining is another measurable activity which now becomes one of the primary concerns of the lower management functions in our factory. This function could be represented by a technician who simply comes by the production line and helps out whenever she/he notices that red time for this line is above a certain threshold.

By helping out and understanding the problem, the technician is in a position to explain it, something which the operators themselves can not be distracted with. We have thus gained a new parameter: “% of classified red time”, derived from the normal activities of our technician. As portions of unclassified red time are selected and explained by the technician on her/his computer, this percentage indicator and the types of ‘red time problems’ that arise now become the key to ‘results control’ for the technician’s process, and become the basis for intervention by other management functions under predefined criteria.

We can note that we have assembled a quite comprehensive picture of the results of this production process, and we have done so without a bureaucracy having to be established. Simply by engaging in the action of producing something and logging it, our database has been populated so that both lower and higher management functions now face a much simpler task. They just need to decide under what circumstances they would have to become involved in the life of this production line, and, given different scenarios, how they might proceed from there.

The reason that 'results control' is so advantageous compared to a bureaucracy is that any process result creates the need for a response that can then be defined by the lower and higher management functions. The results on the production line might range from 100% absenteeism, to real production being 300% higher than anticipated – but whatever the actual event, it can be handled and does not require a bureaucracy to delimit the possibilities beforehand. That being the case, continuous and dynamic self management becomes possible.

But we must note something very important in this case, which is indicative of cybernetic management in general. DT (the amount of time it should take to make 1 unit of the product) is not a goal or target value. It is an understanding of the amount of time required to do the job comfortably by the average person, within the context of the task. Therefore higher productivity is not demanded if operators consistently exceed the DT productivity – as any bureaucracy appointed by a higher management function would immediately jump to do.

The productivity level represented by the DT is that which allows for the self-development of the process in a somewhat relaxed manner. This is measured by the Efficiency Coefficient (EC), which needs only to be kept in check. Unless the process itself is fundamentally changed by production engineering experts, the DT does not change, and so workers never need to worry that the Design Time will decrease if they find a flow of work that allows them to consistently produce faster than it would suggest.

The logic which holds true for a single production line also does for the organisation as a whole. Measures such as the ratio between the number of non-productive work (NPW) hours and the hours worked in direct production provides the basis of control over the results for the whole organisation. This kind of high level indicator is a good basis for higher management functions to intervene when necessary, if the proportions cross certain thresholds.

Consider one final example to appreciate the intuition behind cybernetic results control. In our modern societies today, we have bureaucratically maintained health services, which are comprised of departments with which sick patients should make appointments, within predefined categories. They also maintain additional bureaucracies established by higher management functions (both government and private) to bombard the health professionals with paperwork and try to assess their performance.

A results control orientation might instead rely on conducting continual and general medical checks of the population, the results of which are the inputs to the treatment scheduling process for more specific tests and treatment. Now there is no duplication of effort or activity – the process itself is what creates the performance indicators, so that doctors, nurses and so on never need to consider that a process apart from treating patients is even happening. They just log basic information and when times are difficult, they notice that management functions which otherwise leave them alone take a sudden interest (needing to, as their processes are also subject to control), and that increased resources and help then duly arrive.

It is simply a non-obvious conclusion that the best outcomes by far come from empowering people through establishing results control over suitable results parameters, and allowing processes to develop which best ‘normalise’ those parameters, rather than decreeing static processes from the top down. This is why people hate dealing with organisations in general, because by killing variety at the system 1 level, (rather than allowing the system 1s to be as flexible as possible and then

reducing variety through subsequent information filtering), an organisation becomes intolerable to deal with and quite useless for those both inside and outside of it.

Unfortunately but understandably, people in higher management functions almost always believe that they intuitively know best how to handle every situation in ‘their’ organisation. This being the case, they establish these static bureaucracies which are charged with dealing with specific situations in specific ways, as proxy actors. Don’t do this – instead, step into the office of control over results!

In the next post I will be discussing the Toyota Production System (TPS) – a great leap in cybernetic management theory, where the principles of homeostatic results control are taken all the way to their logical conclusions, as a planning tool which allows the organisation in many important ways to run itself and continually improve its performance.

LESSONS FROM THE TOYOTA PRODUCTION SYSTEM

The Toyota Production System (TPS) is about as far as our human industrial civilization has so far advanced in creating a cybernetic management system for production processes. Whereas Stafford Beer demonstrated which functions an optimal cybernetic system needed, the TPS actually built out the functions for their specific economic-technical and social context.

The TPS emerged from the need which Japanese industry faced to catch up with the huge US automobile manufacturers from the 1950s onward. During their tours of the United States, representatives of the Toyota company noticed two important things – firstly that the Fordist and Taylorist manufacturing orthodoxy looked good on the surface but was actually extremely wasteful, and secondly that the key to a superior system lay in how US supermarkets implemented stock control in order to provide the right amount of product to meet customer demand.

It was not a coincidence that this happened in the automobile industry. It was here that the complexity and variety within the production

processes reached such a high level, that in order to make significant further improvements, a new management system was objectively required. Toyota discovered, rather than invented, this path forward for high complexity production – the Fordist technique, as we'll now consider, had already been played out.

What was the problem with Fordism?

Simply a lack of variety. Fordist production had, from 1908 onward, represented a massive jump in quality and productivity over how factories used to operate, essentially as large workshops. The idea of training people into specialised roles, using standardised tools, to produce exactly the same product over and over on an assembly line, allowed for the first time products of fairly high complexity to be created on a mass scale with a reproducible level of quality.

Workers were regarded here as a type of machine, which could produce a certain number of output parts, given the presence of other machines and a certain number of input parts. This was spelled out explicitly in Frederick Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Production engineers would pre-determine every minute detail of what every worker should do, and then the workers would follow those work steps precisely. That was very successful, and is still a widely used method today, especially in low-technology production processes.

However, there are major drawbacks. For example, any time you want to 'improve' a process in Fordist production, it involves industrial engineers undertaking a long period of designing, trialling and modifying, and then training workers and standardising the new method – this is difficult and time consuming. Faced with the pressures of expanding production rather than tinkering with and disrupting it, management will try to minimise changes to the existing production system. This is the opposite to what you would like in a cybernetic system, which should continually and reactively self-improve and adapt its operations, rather than improvements only coming in a top-down way as a result of proactive management decisions to change processes.

So this was the first big drawback with Fordist production – it requires active management by (in cybernetic terms, which we covered in the piece on the VSM) the ‘higher management’ functions of the organisation. At a certain level of complexity for any cybernetic system, this becomes ineffective. Applied to the human body, this would be like the higher management element (your conscious mind) directly trying to control the rate at which your heart beats, lungs breath and eyes blink, rather than having you body’s lower management functions ‘reactively’ self-regulate those mechanisms.

I have mentioned that Fordist production is also wasteful. The reason for this is pretty simple. Capacity utilisation is generally how the real production situation is compared to a pre-planned production outcome. If capacity utilisation is very high, for every machine and production line, it means the system is working well, and the plan targets will be achieved or even surpassed. The problem with that kind of proactive planning is that, because each process has a different production rate per unit, and each process is trying to operate at maximum capacity, it means that slower production processes will quickly be inundated with input parts that they can’t quickly clear. Faster processes will have the opposite problem – they’ll be waiting around for inputs to be ready, and so to protect against this, they try to build up large inventory buffers.

This means that large stockpiles of ‘work in progress’ (WIP) inventories exist throughout the supply chain, both for slow and fast process steps! Hidden among those stockpiles will be defective products, and if you find one, it is advantageous to simply throw away the defective component and move on, rather than delay production by investigating the cause of the defect. You will also end up with a lot of obsolete stockpiles that you just need to dump.

But most problematic is that emergent problems in the production process do not dynamically force a change in how production works, because there are always plenty of spare components to keep the process going at a high utilisation rate. Even if a part of the process fails for a whole day, this is unlikely to force a change in how the process

works, because that would mean a lot of extra, and apparently unnecessary, work. On paper, it doesn't appear urgent to change anything because if you look at the production data, you'll see that thanks to inventory buffers, production elsewhere never stopped during a period of unscheduled downtime at any given step in the process.

What I have described above is these days called 'push' or 'batch-and-queue' production, but is synonymous with the old Fordist system. It is called 'push' because each process pushes its output onto the next step as fast as it can, causing a high utilisation rate and low cost-per-unit, but also lots of wasted time, effort and material, and a structurally built-in resistance to change. It is also the 'natural' system from the perspective of higher management control, because they assume direct responsibility over each stage in the production process.

Production from below

The Toyota Production System is fundamentally a self-organising system, and therefore a truly cybernetic organisation of production. In contrast to Taylorism and Fordism, in which production engineers design the minutia of specific production operations which are then carried out to the letter by factory operators, here the operators themselves 'hold the stopwatch'. Workers on the factory floor are organised into 'work teams', with a 'team leader' (who is more like a 'delegate' than a 'leader'). The leader's job is to gain consensus with their team about the best current way to carry through production. The leader is responsible for it, but does not have the authority to keep their new method, if the higher management function of the organisation decides that this method is not appropriate for any reason. The team leader has responsibility, but not ultimate authority.

This means that the production process under the TPS is constantly changing, not according to the direct instructions of the factory's higher management but rather under their close supervision. The role of the process control engineer now reduces to interfacing with the work team leaders, and standardising the current best practices that they have come up with. On the basis of this process of moving from one standard

to the next, while always improving, the TPS enables highly complex production systems to adapt as needed, superseding the rigidity of Fordist production.

It is also important to consider the social-relations aspect of this. The implication of a continually improving production process, from the perspective of the operator, is that they might easily ‘improve themselves out of a job’! This is always a major practical problem with the implementation of the TPS – management think that they can get workers to improve processes, without worrying about the implications of this for their own employment. For the TPS to work properly, the workers must be given guarantees that they will not suffer any negative consequences as a result of their own process improvements. Most famously this is expressed through Toyota’s ‘no layoffs’ policy, which they have at various junctures at least tried to implement.

Pull, don’t push

The Toyota Production System is a ‘pull’ production system, again, modeled on supermarket stock control. This relies on Deming’s principle that ‘the next step is the customer’. Unlike in a supermarket, here the inventory buffers exist in-between production steps, so that the process takes on the form of a chain of steps, with a buffer separating each ‘supplier’ from its ‘customer’.

Specifically in what is called the ‘Kanban’ system, each buffer is a group of ‘bins’ of components, and each of these bins can contain only a fixed quantity of parts. So the idea is that the ‘supplier’ production step can only take away a bin and refill it, on the condition that the ‘customer’ production step has returned the bin empty. The time available to the supplier to produce the products (called the ‘takt time’) is in this way forced to synchronise with the rate of consumption of the customer.

In the event that the bins are replenished by the supplier at a slower rate than they were consumed by the customer, the latter would soon run out of input components and have to close down their production line. Each subsequent step would also have to close down given

their lack of inputs, and each preceding step, due to their inability to offload their outputs. Equally, if parts are provided by the supplier more quickly than the customer consumed them, then the bins would quickly fill up, forcing the supplier to shut down its production line when all of the bins were already full. Synchronisation between all steps is thus unavoidable.

So unlike Fordist production, using the TPS we have no interest in maximising productivity at any given step in the process – we only care about total throughput, even if this means machinery lying idle. This implies that we should redesign the supply chain to achieve an ‘even’ rate of production at each step, which is equal to the production speed of the slowest step. We should then work on improving production at this step.

A brief side-note: Referring back to the production metrics in my post called ‘Why “control over results”?’, my spin on this is that production should basically conform to the following equation. If it does so, then, during each ‘takt time’ in which the buffer is refilled, supply and demand are forced to match.

$$(OT / DT) / (\text{shift time} / \text{takt time}) \approx \text{average demand} / (\text{shift time} / \text{takt time}) \approx \text{buffer capacity}$$

or, Supply $\approx$ Demand $\approx$ Buffer

[Where OT = ‘Operator Time’ (the total hours worked during a shift), DT = ‘Design Time’ (current standardised time to make 1 unit of the product), ‘shift time’ = number of hours in shift, ‘takt time’ = time taken to replenish buffer, ‘average demand’ = the current average level of withdrawals from the buffer during a shift]

Process improvement

Assuming that the buffer consists of a given number of inventory bins, Toyota quickly learned that the removal of one of these bins would force the rate of replenishment of each remaining bin to increase. This is clear

in the above equation. If the buffer capacity is reduced, then, with demand and the shift time unchanged, the takt time must fall.

This meant that the margin for error in the synchronisation of the production steps was reduced. Now, one fewer bin could be restocked by the supplier, before it would be forced to shut down production due to insufficient demand. From the perspective of the 'customer' step, the time needed to consume one fewer bin full of products now represented the maximum amount of time that their production could continue, if supply was interrupted for any reason.

It was found that work teams are extremely innovative at redesigning production processes over and over, in order to keep production going under ever-tighter time constraints, established by this reduction in the size of buffers. Thus the supermarket 'pull' system came together with the 'self-organised' production philosophy. As a direct result, under the TPS the level of quality rises rapidly beyond that achievable under traditional Fordist production, because a faulty component is the same as no component at all. A batch of faulty parts would equally cause the shutdown of the subsequent production line, as these are observed by the 'customer' step right away who determine that they cannot be used (rather than added to a stockpile).

Algedonics

What Toyota called the 'Andon' signalling system is Stafford Beer's 'algedonic signal', discussed in my piece on the VSM. Algedonics are necessary for the stock-control and self-improvement system to function, as they are necessary for any good cybernetic system. An Andon signal alerts those to which it is addressed that a problem has arisen which requires their immediate attention.

Whenever it was found that the 'Kanban' bins were either all empty or all full for example, resulting in the stopping of production, an Andon signal would be activated. The signal would at first be addressed to the work teams immediately responsible for those lines. From the moment of its activation, a timer would begin, giving the work teams a peri-

od of time in which to resolve the problem. Doing so quickly was critical to preventing the whole supply chain from having to stop production. If they were unable to do so within a short period of minutes however, the Andon signal would ‘escalate’ to the next level of the organisation’s hierarchy. Repair personnel and production experts would be alerted that they need to come and help resolve the problem. If they too were unable to resolve it within another fixed time period, it would ‘escalate’ to the next level of responsibility and so on.

The occurrence of the ‘problem’ itself was found to be the key to the self-improvement process. While a Fordist production system would try to avoid problems which might interrupt the production process, here the problem which had interrupted production becomes the basis for the next round of improvement to the process. Without it, the improvement would never have taken place. The ‘Andon’ system is thus a classic example of an ‘algedonic loop’ modifying the behaviour of a cybernetic system. This critical cybernetic feature is completely absent from Fordist production.

TPS Today

If you’re reading this on any modern electronic device, then you’ve already got a product which was produced using the TPS or one of its derivative systems. In medium to high complexity production, Fordism and Taylorism as philosophies are no longer relevant, and the TPS has become ubiquitous. The factory where I work can be characterised as of ‘medium’ complexity, as we produce domestic-use electrical equipment, and for us the TPS is undoubtedly the standard to which we try to hold ourselves.

In lower complexity production, this is not generally so. Sweatshops making jeans in Bangladesh do not feel the need to deviate from pre-TPS production principles. I believe that due to the perception of a loss of control by managers, such radical changes occur only when the conditions are such that an industry has no choice but to adopt them. Toyota themselves, after all, from the beginning adopted such a radical strategy when they were facing bankruptcy in the 1950s, and by the

1980s all of their competitors, from Ford to GM, seeing the writing on the wall, copied the TPS as best they could.

There's vastly more to say on the TPS, but rather than go any further here, I encourage everyone who hasn't done so to pick up the classic texts on the subject, *The Toyota Way* and *Lean Thinking*.

Further Reading

Donal's blog can be found at theofficeforcontroloverresults.wordpress.com.

Additionally, there are several texts that we at black mold would recommend on the subject of systems theory and design. These are:

- Modern Industry and Prospects for Socialism by Donal Costello (Cosmonaut Magazine)
- The Volvo Uddevalla Plant by Christian Berggren
- Diagnosing the System for Organizations by Stafford Beer
- Designing Freedom by Stafford Beer
- The Dialectical Biologist by Lewontin and Levins

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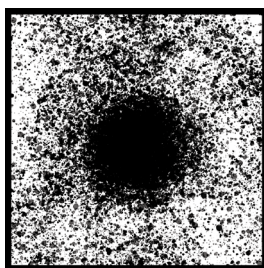
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Dedicated to whoever you wind up becoming (2026-)



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