

The New Class Struggle

REAL UTOPIA IS A WIDE-RANGING BOOK that can deliver for the open-minded reader. It relates ideas and actions that develop naturally out of commonly held values, but that can still bring surprise, the shock of revelation, the rearrangement of familiar territory, and a different framework for us to see ourselves within. Who is the “us”? People who subscribe to the cry of the World Social Forum: “Another World Is Possible!” The questions many of us urgently want answers to are: What is this “other world”? What does it look like? And: How will we get there? *Real Utopia* doesn’t pretend to have all the answers to these questions, but it has many more of the answers, and more satisfying answers, than any other single book I know of. I’m not convinced by every single claim or argument put forward in *Real Utopia*, but I am convinced that everyone who seriously wants “another world” in the spirit of the World Social Forum should engage with this readable, remarkable book. The point of *Real Utopia* is to counter despair, and to present a credible vision of the future that can meet the growing desire for a humane social order that eliminates centralized power and oppression. According to the “complementary holistic” theory underlying the book, such a vision should address simultaneously gender, power, race, and class, without giving any one sphere primacy over the others. There are therefore thoughtful and attractive contributions from Cynthia Peters, on a vision for “family, sexuality, and caregiving in a better world”; Stephen Shalom on possible new political structures in such a world; and Justin Podur on race and culture. The heart of the book, however, and the overwhelming bulk of its 400-odd pages, lies in a proposal as to how our economic lives could be transformed by a new set of structures known as “participatory economics” – “parecon” – for short. Even within “complementary holism” (previously known as “totalism”), class is still the central concern. One possible justification for the greater emphasis on economics is that

undoing capitalism would help to undermine other forms of oppression. Cynthia Peters observes: "The principles that guide a pareconish society would do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to addressing gender imbalances outside the home." The elimination of sexist income inequality and women's economic dependence on men, and the creation of workplaces that "ensure equal access to decision-making, so women and men would be equally experienced at taking on empowered roles," would all create systematic pressures towards gender equality (though not guaranteeing it), in her view. For people sickened by patriarchy and capitalism, this should be very attractive. Similar remarks could be made in relation to other forms of oppression. However, parecon has met with a great deal of hostility in just the circles one would expect it to be welcomed. There are two strands to *Real Utopia*: experience and theory. My advice to someone new to parecon would be to first turn to the brief chapters dealing with experience of parecon enterprises, such as Jessica Azulay's essay on *The New Standard*, a trail-blazing radical online hard news paper that lit up the U.S. scene for four years. The editors and journalists of *The New Standard* collective divided the work of the business into four categories: managerial, content, administrative, and a mixed category they called "conmin." (There would have been a janitorial category, if they hadn't all been working in separate physical spaces.) "Managerial" work included participating in collective meetings and other policy-related decision-making. "Content" work included reporting, editing, and website development. "Administrative" tasks were bookkeeping, answering email, providing technical support for users, taking minutes, and so on. The point of labeling tasks in this way was to ensure that each person in the collective experienced as much empowering work, or as much tedious rote work as everyone else. The "conmin" category was invented to account for the fact that there were tasks which were less desirable than most content work, but more empowering than most administrative work. Azulay writes: "When we divided up the work, we tried to make sure that each

staffer was assigned roughly the same number of hours of each kind of work." In parecon, this is known as a "balanced job complex." In a parecon society, job complexes should be balanced not just inside a workplace, but across the economy, a point made forcefully by Paul Burrows in his valuable reflections on his five years working in Winnipeg's Mondragón Bookstore and Coffee House collective. Together with Lydia Sargent's typically brisk and bold account of the creation of South End Press and *Z Magazine* (heroic endeavors both), these are inspiring and enriching examples of radical cooperative enterprises surviving – and upholding anti-capitalist values – under highly stressful conditions. On the wider scene, parecon is a proposal for a new way of organizing the economy as a whole, with a new pay system (remunerating for effort and sacrifice rather than the economic contribution made) and a set of structures for collective, participatory economic planning. LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM IS BASED ON THE claim that a future society can be constructed in which working people directly control their own destinies – in their own workplaces and neighborhoods – without the need for any form of external control by state, corporation, party, or other managerial elite. Different proposals have been made over the last 150 years or so as to how these networks of workers' cooperatives and neighborhood assemblies could work. Parecon contains a rigorous, theoretically consistent, and economically valid model that has been developed for workers' and consumers' councils to engage in participatory planning. This model is not spelled out in *Real Utopia*, but an intriguing relevant example is sketched out: the development of participatory, bottom-up (upside-down) planning in the Indian state of Kerala between 1996 and 2001, involving over 3 million households in local associations. Other inspiring and fascinating large-scale efforts touched on in *Real Utopia* include the factory takeovers in Argentina and the extraordinary participatory democratic initiatives in Venezuela. There is much to learn from these initiatives, from the history of the Russian factory committees in 1917 (discussed by Tom Wetzel), and from

the anarchist transformation of much of agricultural and industrial life in Spain during the Civil War (examined by Dave Mark-land). I personally learned a great deal from these essays – and even more from Robin Hahnel’s extraordinarily rich discussion of social democratic reformism and anarchist purism. These analytical and historical contributions are worth the price of *Real Utopia* by themselves. However, the real value of *Real Utopia*, and of parecon, comes from a rather sharper challenge. The central value of anti-capitalism is that class is wrong. It is wrong that a small minority who hold power by reason of ownership, by reason of wealth, should dictate the lives of society as a whole, forcing people to rent themselves out as tools used for purposes they do not choose. Anti-capitalism, if it means anything, means a commitment to classlessness. Yet it is clear from 150 years of revolution that working class people have more to fear than the investing/owning class. As Bakunin foresaw long ago, the educated, intellectual classes can also seize hold of the reins of power, often in the name of the people, so that the people will be beaten with “the people’s stick.” There are actually three classes at work in industrial societies – capitalist owners, workers, and an intermediate stratum, which Bakunin called “the new class” and in parecon is known as the “coordinator class.” When I first became aware of parecon, I was fully aware of, and subscribed to, Bakuninist critiques of Leninism and “the new class.” Still, I had a number of questions and concerns about parecon (some of which are expressed by Barbara Ehrenreich in her semi-debate with Michael Albert in *Real Utopia*). One thing I was not convinced about was the idea of “balanced job complexes,” and the suggestion that we should try to implement these now, in our current progressive organizations. I’m a writer, an editor, a speaker, a facilitator. I have specialized skills. It seemed irrational, if not bizarre, to expect me to do a lot of other forms of (disempowering, rote) work as part of my radical “job complex,” when this would reduce the amount of time I spent doing the things which I am good at, and which are badly

needed. I carried on feeling this way until the summer of 2006 when, as part of a special ZNet conference, I watched Michael Albert ably and patiently fending off disbelief and fairly hostile criticisms of parecon from radical intellectuals just like me. Unbidden, two ideas rose up inside me. Firstly, I thought: "Michael Albert is a great man." (Now why did I think that?) Secondly, it came upon me that the real reason I was resistant to the idea of the "balanced job complex" was I have a class interest as an intellectual in expecting other people (less educated, confident, articulate, word-skilled people) to do the boring work that has to be done in any movement for social change. I was ashamed of myself. The value of parecon at this point is, in my view, two-fold. It provides a rigorous model for a future society that "works" theoretically, giving credence to the idea that there is no worked out non-authoritarian alternative to capitalism that is worth pursuing. Much more important, in my view, is that it sharply confronts the class interest of intellectuals working in progressive movements. Such as myself. Lydia Sargent writes that when she helped to set up South End Press, one (invaluable) radical publishing house was run by three white men; well-educated white women did most of the editing; a black woman was the receptionist; and Latinos packaged and shipped material from the warehouse. It seems safe to assume that class differences aligned with gender and race inequalities. In the essay I have already referred to, and which I cannot praise too highly, Paul Burrows writes: "We should not tell people anything, unless our movements, our own alternatives, our own institutions embody the values we profess to hold." We need to build the future now, in what we do now. I believe in classlessness. I've had a revelation about the balanced job complex. I'm a committed activist - I've been to prison four times (admittedly for the briefest of sentences) for political action. On the British scene, many people who know me see me as near the radical extreme. And yet. Have I tried to create balanced job complexes at *Peace News*, where I am a co-editor? At the peace group Justice Not

Vengeance, where I am one of three organizers? In Rootstock, the radical social investors' co-operative, or Walden Pond, the radical housing co-operative, I am part of? Have I even raised the subject for discussion? If we are going to replace capitalism with a decent society, we are going to have to deal with the new class as well as the owning class. I've met the class enemy. It's me. And probably you. I can't think of a better place to start the new class struggle than by studying *Real Utopia*.