

Why I am not a socialist

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Editor's note: We post this article in the interests of contributing to debate on the left. Responses are welcome.

Socialists get the main issue right ... capitalism has to be scrapped. But they get almost everything else wrong, including the situation we are in, the revolutionary goal and especially the strategy for achieving it. Consequently a great deal of well-intentioned energy is being wasted. Bold claims from a member of the extreme left, so a somewhat lengthy justification is required.

Historically, socialism has been about the working class taking power from the capitalist class and thus freeing the productive system from the contradictions built into capitalism and enabling it to be run in the interests of all. This has generally been seen as involving taking the state and enabling it to make socially desirable decisions, especially those enabling "living standards" to be raised. It takes for granted centralised control of the economy, usually via a democratically elected government. Until the last few decades this made sense but now our understanding of the global ecological situation has radically changed and this reveals that initial vision to be no longer appropriate. It is important therefore to outline why the situation is now so different as to invalidate the traditional socialist vision, and to explain what its replacement must be.

The concern underlying this argument is not to persuade people on the radical left to abandon their fundamental principles but to recognise that these now require rethinking of sub-goals and means.

The sustainability predicament.

It was not until the middle of the last century that it began to become evident that the biophysical sustainability of the planet was being threatened by the quest for limitless growth and affluence. It is now clear that the basic cause of the multi-faceted global predicament is that there is far too much producing and consuming going on, meaning that we have gone through the limits to growth. For instance the ecosystems of the planet are being destroyed because far too much is being taken out of nature and far too much waste is being dumped back into it, resources are dwindling, causing conflicts and resource wars.

Unfortunately the magnitude of the overshoot is not generally recognised. The “footprint” measure put forward by the World Wildlife Foundation (2018) indicates that to provide the average Australian with food, settlement area, water and energy takes about 7 ha of productive land. Therefore if the 9.8 billion people expected to be on earth by 2050 were by then to have risen to Australia’s present “living standard” about 70 billion ha would be needed. But there are only about 12 billion ha of productive land on the planet, so if only a quarter of it is left for nature we Australians right now are using an average of almost 10 times the amount it would be possible for all to use.

Others indicate worse multiples. (Wiedman et al., 2014, Hickel, 2018.) And the difficulty in securing resources is continually increasing. Ore grades are falling, water, soil and food sources are becoming more problematic.

However this has only been an indication of the present grossly unsustainable situation. We must add the effect of economic growth. If 9.8 billion people were to rise to the GDP per capita Australians would have in 2050 given 3% p.a. economic growth, then total world economic output would be approaching 18 times the present amount. But the present amount is grossly unsustainable: the WWF estimates that we’d need 1.7 planet Earths to meet the present global resource demand sustainably.

Few people, including those of the red or green variety, have any idea of the magnitude of the problem. If we are to achieve a sustainable and just world we in rich countries will have to go down to consuming resources at something like one-tenth of our present per capita rates. (For the detailed numerical argument see Trainer 2021.)

The commonly held “tech-fix” position denies that there are grounds for concern here, on the assumption that technical advance will enable economic growth to continue indefinitely without growth in resource use or ecological impact. However this faith that economic growth can be “decoupled” from resource demand and ecological impact has now been contradicted by a large amount of evidence.

Anyone still unaware of this should consult the massive studies by Hickel and Kallis, Parrique et al., and Haberl et al. The second lists over 300 studies and the third refers to over 850. Despite constant effort to improve productivity and efficiency, in general growth of GDP is accompanied by growth in resource use. (Wiedmann et al., 2014.) And in fact the trends are getting worse. The demolition of the decoupling faith has been central in the rise of the Degrowth movement.

This understanding of our situation rules out the revolutionary goal most socialists have traditionally held, which has been to take control of the industrial system from the capitalist class and to apply it to enabling all to rise to high “living standards”. This “productivist” strand has traditionally been prominent in socialist thinking. Indeed some recent socialists have argued strenuously for the “ecomodernist” quest for increasing output to achieve “fully automated luxury communism”. (Phillips 2012, Scharzar 2012 and Bastani 2019.)

Various recent “Eco-socialists” recognise that resource scarcity is problematic and that a satisfactory post-capitalist society would need to moderate demand but none of these come to terms with the magnitude of the reductions required. When this is focal it can be seen that the revolutionary goal cannot be “normal” rich word “living standards”. The recently emerging “Eco-socialists” recognise this but most if not all of the prominent advocates including Kovel, (2007), Albert on “Parecon”, (2003), Lowy (2015), Bellamy-Foster (2008), Sarkar (1999), and Smith (2016), do not deal with the crucial, game-changing fact that the good society cannot be an affluent society. Nor does the account of “Inclusive Democracy”, (1997) put forward by Fotopoulos. Few if any refer to any need for very large scale reductions in GDP and per capita “living standards” or to the cultural problem involved in radically simple lifestyles and systems. It is not realized that a thorough going socialism which maintained commitment to economic growth and high “living standards” would still accelerate us towards ecological collapse.

What then must the goal be?

It follows from the foregoing account that the goal must be a society in which all the world’s people could live well on a very small fraction of the present rich world average per capita resource consumption and ecological impact. If present rates are far too high and technical advance is not going to cut them down sufficiently then there can be no other option.

This cannot be done in anything like the present economic system, which has to not only maintain present levels of production and consumption but to constantly increase them. Nor can it be done in a reformed version of the present system as most within the Green New Deal camp assume. It can only be done by transition to a completely different kind of economic system.

The purpose of The Simpler Way project has been to show that given the nature of the limits to growth situation a sustainable and just society has no option but to be characterised by the following elements:

- Mostly small, self-sufficient localised communities.
- Community self-government via participatory democracy.
- Zero-growth economies, driven by needs and welfare not profit or market forces., and managed and maintained by their citizens.
- Predominance of values to do with cooperation not competition, collectivism not individualism and above all materially simple lifestyles and systems.

There could still be (small) cities, modern medicine, universities, professionals, sophisticated technologies and (socially useful) high-tech R and D. But there would be little in the way of trade, travel, tourism, a finance industrialisation, globalisation , factories, urbanism, centralisation or state-level bureaucracy.

The probability of achieving such a transition must at present be rated as poor, but that is not relevant here. The point is that if the foregoing arguments regarding limits and technical fixes are sound then there is no alternative; a sustainable society capable of providing well for all has to be some kind of Simpler Way.

This goal contradicts the common socialist vision of post-capitalist society, especially with respect to centralisation. As will be made clearer below, the new communities cannot be established by or run from the centre. The (small, remnant) “state” can only be a facilitating, monitoring, coordinating etc. agency under the control of federated towns and regions. This is because the primary prerequisite

for a satisfactory post-affluence society is cultural. It is to do with ideas, values and dispositions, and these can only emerge from grass-roots conditions and experience and cannot be given taught or imposed or enforced by the state no matter how powerful it is.

This highlights what I see as Marx's most serious mistake, the failure to grasp the significance of culture. He analysed primarily in terms of economics, politics and power and gave little attention to the significance of culture for the nature of the good society or the means to achieving it. All that was required of the working class for revolutionary purposes was that they become "a class for itself", meaning little more than being for the overthrow of the system and, in Lenin's terms, ready to follow the vanguard party. As Avineri (1968) points out, in the immediate post take-over period of the revolution Marx expected there to be only a "crude communism" in which there would still be the old unsatisfactory attitudes and ideas regarding property, work, income, competition and acquisitiveness. Workers would still be in the habit of working for a boss, for wages, would still accept division of labour, put up with alienation, and, most importantly here, would still be focused on the acquisition of property and material wealth. He thought that only in the later post-revolutionary stage of transition to communism would these dispositions be overcome, via a transformation of mentality or culture.

That might have been a satisfactory position in times when the goal could be gearing the newly captured industrial system to the welfare of the workers. But as has been explained that cannot now be the defining goal of the revolution. The immediate goal must be to achieve a cultural revolution which establishes the understandings, values and dispositions without which transition from capitalism towards a simpler way is impossible.

Marx criticised Hegel for not thinking that the economic structure was the fundamental determinant of a society, and therefore he said Hegel should be stood on his head. The foregoing argument means that it is Marx who should now be stood on his head.

A related but lesser issue is Marx's insistence that the means of production must not be privately owned. In my firm view most production should be carried out by private firms ... in the hands of small family or cooperative groups, functioning within their communities according to strict social guidelines and oversight, and motivated by the new ideas, values and dispositions. As a "homesteader" I know at first hand the profound life satisfaction that comes with getting one's "oikos" into good shape, the senses of empowerment, autonomy, competence and achievement, the freedom to do it your way, and the enjoyment of the beautiful landscape, devices, systems and gardens it has taken years to establish. The good citizen would obviously be deeply committed to the cooperative pursuit of the public good and the welfare of others, but being able to work/play in one's own patch is extremely important. And when the purposes of production are a) to pay for the relatively few goods one needs to purchase, and b) to enjoy helping to meet the needs of one's fellow citizens, then in a community that will not support socially undesirable ventures it is not likely that tycoons will emerge.

However all large enterprises should be publicly owned; in an economy that has undergone marked degrowth and has no interest payments (interest is not possible in a steady-state economy), there will be no place for private investors and shareholders. (See TSW: The New Economy.)

Above all the socialist perspective assumes that the revolutionary initiative lies with the centre, with the new rulers of the state. Again that might have been the appropriate orientation in all previous revolutions, but now it is not. Conditions have disqualified it. The limits to growth have determined firstly that the state cannot run millions of sustainable settlements and secondly that it cannot establish them in the first place. These communities can only form and work if they emerge from lived experience at the grassroots level. People must learn from the conditions they live in that the

new attitudes and practices are essential. These conditions and experiences will produce motivation by radically new ideas, values and dispositions focused on localism, community autonomy, cooperation, solidarity, citizen self-government and non-material sources of life satisfaction. Again governments cannot create or impose these cultural elements.

Thus the limits to growth predicament makes this revolution unlike any before because it determines that cultural change is the fundamental prerequisite. The shift in consciousness will have to gather momentum long before capitalism can be swept aside. This aligns with the anarchism of Kropotkin and Tolstoy who prioritized the development of the appropriate vision, not the development of a vanguard party or the taking of state power. (Marshall, 1992, pp. 372.) The latter are important problems and tasks but they cannot be achieved until Stage 2 of the revolution, (... and they will then probably be relatively minor issues, if Stage 1 goes well; see below.)

“But ...” the socialist is likely to protest, “... being in control of the state would enable the new ways to be introduced and facilitated. Control of the state will make it possible to work on that shift in mass consciousness.” But consider the faulty logic here. There are only two ways that the control of the state for Simpler Way purposes could come about. The first is via some kind of coup whereby power is seized by a vanguard party which has the intention of implementing The Simpler Way, and then converting uncomprehending masses to it. That is not plausible. The second path would be via the election to government of a party with a Simpler Way platform. But that could not happen unless the (cultural or ideological) revolution for a Simpler Way had previously been won. A Simpler Way party could not be elected to control of the state until after it had persuaded the majority of people to its ideas and proposals. Thus, that revolution would be essentially constituted by the development of widespread acceptance of the Simpler Way vision. Taking state power would then become conceivable, as a consequence of the revolution.

So our focal task here and now is to work on the cultural problem, not to try to take state power. In my view the left in general has failed to appreciate any of this (although Gramsci’s discussion of hegemony could be said to have moved in the right direction.)

Revolutionary strategy: How might the transition be made?

The preceding section argued that traditional state-centred socialist strategy is quite mistaken, especially at this early stage of the revolution. Certainly radical revision of the (remnant) state will eventually be necessary but effort should not go into attempting to do that at this point in time. Apart from the above cultural argument, there is the strong case that capitalism cannot be defeated; it is far too deeply entrenched. It is not just that the capitalist class owns the media, most wealth, most of the economy, and the major political parties (largely via campaign contributions), it has also firmly established capitalist ideology as the indubitable taken-for-granted world view among people in general, including the deplorables and the excluded. How then can we get rid of it?

We can’t...but it is in the process of getting rid of itself. As Marx saw its contradictions will eventually destroy it. Numerous analysts argue that the process is well underway. Central in Simpler Way transition theory is the conviction that we are heading for a time of great troubles, a global breakdown that could be terminal for humankind, and that there is no possibility of avoiding this now. The reasons (detailed in Trainer, 2020) include:

- The enormity and urgency of the changes required (e.g., less than a decade to deal effectively with climate. (Levin, 2018, Steffen, 2020.)
- The worsening petroleum supply difficulties in the Middle East (Ahmed, 2017) and likely in the fracking arena (Hughes 2016, Cunningham 2019, Whipple 2019, Cobb, 2019), and declining

energy return on energy invested values.

- The many other biophysical difficulties reducing the capacity of economies to deal with the accelerating problems tightening the limits noose, including water scarcity, fisheries decline, deteriorating mineral grades, accelerating costs of ecological disruption including climate change, toxicity of ecosystems, agricultural soil damage and loss, ocean acidification, and sea rise. These will cut into the diminishing resources available to apply to solving system difficulties.
- The huge and rising global debt figures.
- The problems interact, compound and positively feedback toward run-away consequences.
- Existing political institutions are not capable of making changes of the magnitude required. Fierce resistance would flare, especially on the part of the rich since the “degrowth” solution involves eliminating vast quantities of productive capacity and therefore of factories and businesses, investment opportunities, globalisation, trade and finance activity.
- Ruling elites incapable of questioning growth and market forces have no idea that capitalism is cause of the chaos or what to do to resolve it, other than to shore up capitalism knowing that the goal must be to “get the economy going again”. Thus they will further deprive the masses in order to give capital what it wants, and they will increase repression to contain the dissent thereby generated.

Many analysts have detailed how the combined effects are likely to lead to catastrophic breakdown in the global economy, including Mason 2003, Korowicz, 2012, Morgan, 2013, Kunstler, 2005, Greer, 2005, Bardi, 2011, Randers 2012, Collins 2021, and Duncan 2013.

The best outcome would be a Goldilocks depression that is not so savage as to eliminate any hope of reconstruction but severe enough to force people towards the above alternative. That is not the most likely outcome but it is the one to be worked for.

The implications for strategy contradict socialist assumptions on a number of issues in addition to the concern with centralisation and taking the state there is the belief that the worker is the agent of change. The above perspective is that the unique conditions of this revolution determines that everyone especially neighbours, are the ones who can and must do the job. This also clashes with the assumption is that a vanguard party must lead.

Perhaps the most heretical implication is, “Do not confront capitalism”. This contradicts the socialist’s fundamental assumption that we must get rid of the old before the new can be built, on the rubble left by the probably violent struggle. However the historically unique situation we have now entered indicates the possibility of a non-confrontational strategy, one that involves turning away and “ignoring capitalism to death”, and as the system self-destructs beginning to build aspects of its replacement. (This does not deny the need to confront over specific threats, such as saving threatened ecosystems.)

Versions of this turning away strategy are increasingly being endorsed and practiced, for instance among the large scale Andean peasant movements, Zapatistas, Campesinos, Catalans and the Rojavan Kurds. (See also, Apfel-Marglin, 1998, p. 39; Relocalise, 2009; Mies and Shiva, 1993; Benholdt- Thompson and Mies; 1999, Korten, 1999, p. 262; Rude, 1998, p. 53, and Quinn, 1999, pp. 95, 137.)

What then is to be done?

The answer is, “prefigure”. This is the term anarchists use to refer to the effort to build here and now within the existing society aspects of the desired alternative society. Many have adopted this

outlook of not waiting until the old system has been swept away and not prioritising fighting head-on against it (Rai, 1995, p. 99; Pepper, 1996, pp. 36, 305; Bookchin, 1980, p. 263). (Obviously there are also other things to do as well, including teaching and writing.)

Socialists have traditionally been very hostile to and scathing of this strategy. They have seen it as naïve and mistaken, incapable of seriously threatening capitalism and guaranteed to be quickly crushed if it ever did. But as has been argued above, since the advent of the limits to growth conditions have changed and consequently goals and appropriate strategies have changed, now making prefiguring the most subversive action that can be undertaken.

The point of prefiguring can easily be misunderstood. It is not primarily to increase the number of post-revolutionary ways that exist, and the assumption is not that just setting up post-revolutionary arrangements one by one will lead to these eventually having replaced consumer-capitalist ways. The main point is educational/ideological. By becoming involved in the many emerging local initiatives activists are likely to be in the most effective position to acquaint participants and onlookers with the Simpler Way perspective, and with the need to eventually go on from the present localist preoccupations to the more distant Stage 2 problem of dealing with growth, the state, the market and the capitalist system. (See further below.) The point is in other words, cultural and educational. It has been stressed above that the problem is cultural the need to help large numbers to recognise the desirability of the new ways. Establishing small examples of the radical new arrangements is likely to be the best way to help people to see the desirability of those ways, and to see the need to abandon conventional ideas, systems and values. It is not assumed that this will automatically happen; a great deal of effort needs to go into using the prefigured examples as devices to illustrate and drive home the possibility and sense of adopting them.

This process is in fact well underway. Many groups, agencies, communities and indeed local councils are to some extent involved in establishing post-capitalist ways and illustrating and explaining their virtues. Most notable have been the Eco-village and Transition Towns movements but much more numerous have been the participants in Third World initiatives such as the Campesina, Zapatista, Ubuntu and Swaraj movements. The Senegalese government intends to establish 1400 Eco-villages. (St Ong, 2015.) Leahy's (2009, 2018) account of the African Chikukwa initiative compares the futility of goading peasants to compete on the international food export markets with the development of highly self-sufficient permaculture villages. The Rojavan Kurds have established remarkable levels of local self government despite intense military harassment. (Trainer, 2018.) The publication ROAR and the Symbiosis organisation are documenting these kinds of initiatives and contributing to the increasing realisation of the possibility and importance of ordinary people taking collective control of their local communities.

Stage 2 of the revolution.

The forgoing discussion has only been about the first stage of this revolution, where the focus is primarily on achieving the cultural goal. Only if this is more or less successful then structural change at the macroscopic level would become possible. Following is an indication of the direction the later events in the transition might take.

As local economies become more widespread and elaborate and as the global economy deteriorates it will become increasingly obvious that scarce national resources must be deliberately and rationally devoted to the production of basic necessities, as distinct from being left for market forces to allocate to the most profitable purposes. There will always be items that towns cannot produce for themselves. In general most of these can come from surrounding regions, including grain and dairy produce, appliances, various materials, and tools and light machinery such as irrigation equipment (...although the Remaking Settlements, Trainer, 2019, study finds that surprisingly little would need

to be imported from further afield.) However some will have to come from more distant sources such as steel and cement works. It will therefore be necessary for all towns and regions to be able to import these few but crucial items from the national economy, and to be able to produce some of these to export into it.

These conditions will generate the pressure that in time will force states to carry out revolutionary change in national economies. People will become acutely aware that scarce national resources must not be wasted but must be devoted to providing settlements and regions with the crucial materials and manufactures they cannot produce for themselves. This will require planning to distribute to all towns the opportunity to produce and export some few items, so that they can pay for their importation of those few they need. There will also be tasks and functions that must be planned and administered from the centre, such as allocating water use throughout a river basin, and facilitating the movement of workers from moribund industries to new ones.

Thus the survival imperatives emanating from the grass roots will force central governments to greatly increase intervention, planning, regulation and restructuring. It might at first sight seem that this means the emergence of or need for greatly increased state power. On the contrary it is likely to be a process whereby power is taken away from the centre, and whereby citizens exercise increasing control over central governments, via their town assemblies. The tone will shift from making requests on the state to making demands, and then to taking increasing power over the planning and decision making processes.

It will be increasingly recognized that the local is the only level where the right decisions for self-sufficient communities can be made. Thus the remnant state-level agencies will in time become controlled by and servants of the towns and regions, run via typical anarchist processes involving thoroughly participatory town self-government feeding into federated systems for dealing with wider issues. Eventually all significant decisions including those concerning national policies, will be made by town assemblies voting on options brought down to the town level from conferences of delegates from towns and regions (drawing on professional expertise where appropriate.)

Needless to say, the chances of the transition proceeding as has been outlined here are not at all promising, but the argument has been that this is the path that must be worked for. One of its merits is that it envisages a transition that could be entirely peaceful and non-authoritarian.

A major issue that has not been yet addressed in this account is the likely response to the coming breakdown by the capitalist class and its associates. The breakdown will write off vast amounts of debt, investment, corporations and assets, thus eliminating much of the capitalist class. As in Anarchist Spain in the 1930s many bankrupt factory owners will be happy to join community collectives, transferring their assets to them. Many agribusiness farmers unable to access diesel or to export produce will be eager to sell or lease land cheaply to enable the establishment of new settlements. What remains of capitalism will certainly attempt to shift to its fascist form, but resource scarcity along with drastically impoverished "effective demand" will thwart this. Many regions, especially in the Third World will be cut adrift as plantations, sweat shops and mines cease to be profitable, and thus will be liberated to follow the Zapatistas. Attempts to impose savage "austerity" on rich world masses are likely. The outcome will depend on the extent to which people have come to clearly understand that their fate depends on taking collective control of their local economies. If the new vision is not spread widely in the short time there is left to do this, then the longer term trajectory will be towards war lords semi-feudalism and large scale population die-off.

It should be evident that both the nature of the alternative society that has been sketched here, and the transition path to it, embody classical anarchist principles. In the coming era of limits, scarcity and frugality only communities embracing these can deliver a sustainable and just society. In

addition the path to the establishment of those communities cannot be other than via prefiguring whereby ordinary citizens in existing settlements building thoroughly participatory arrangements. Neither the new society nor the strategy for achieving it can involve significant degrees of centralization.

Further, the new ways must involve “subsidiarity” whereby decisions and arrangements are worked out at the lowest levels possible, not handed down from higher officials and bureaucracies. In addition there is extensive spontaneity whereby ordinary citizens take informal and immediate action where they see the need for it. Above all, hierarchy, officials, status levels, titles, power differences and domination in any form are to be avoided if there is to be a climate of egalitarianism, empowerment, collectivism and camaraderie. These principles and practices are not matters of preference, they are about relationships and attitudes that must prevail if the community is to work well.

These have been reasons why I am an anarchist not a socialist, and the reasons why the distinction is not trivial.

(Parts of this essay have been adapted from Trainer 2020.)

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