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Marxism

Democracy and Ecological Crisis

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Last fall 15,000 scientists issued a second dire notice to humanity that we are on a collision course with the limits of our planet. They concluded, "To prevent widespread misery, humanity must practice a more environmentally sustainable alternative to business as usual," including "reassess[ing]... the role of an economy rooted in growth." That means that we have to challenge capitalism; there is no capitalism without growth. Rosa Luxemburg's statement on the eve of World War I that the choice is between socialism or barbarism was never more true. But today our struggle is about our very existence.

This reality should shape the way we think about politics and how we do politics. Democracy is often said to be both the means and the end of *socialism*. Capitalist societies are peculiar class societies in that, especially the United States, they are said to be democratic. So what do we mean by "democracy" and by "socialism?"

The root meaning of "democracy" is rule by the people – which entails that it admits of degrees according to two measures: first, how inclusive is the category of "the people" and second, what the people get to decide. By the first measure – usually the only one considered – our democracy has clearly expanded. In those capitalist societies that are politically democratic, (not all, of course) everyone, at least all citizens, gets to vote, but this hardly happened from the beginning, by "nature" as supporters of capitalism seem to believe; indeed it has been a long heroic struggle. At the beginning only a tiny percentage of the population had the vote; property qualifications for male voters were not removed throughout the U S until the middle of the nineteenth century, while women won the right to vote less than one hundred years ago. African Americans were effectively denied the right to vote in the southern states until the Civil Rights movement won the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and they still face struggles over felon disenfranchisement and voter ID.

Even at its most inclusive, however, the formal equality of democracy in capitalism is undermined by economic inequality; those with more economic power simply have more influence over political decisions. Extreme inequality, the influence of money in elections, and the peculiar institution of the electoral college further limit US political democracy.

Even more important, however, is the second measure of degrees of democracy, viz, that the range of issues on which voters have power is extremely limited. Both before and after capitalism (in the Soviet-style systems) political and economic power were fused. With capitalism, however, the "economic" and the "political" became separate for the first time, and real social power rests in the economy. As Ellen Meiksins Wood argued, this made political democracy both more possible but also less important. The most crucial decisions affecting us all: what to produce (gas-guzzling and driverless private cars or buses and trains), how to produce (fossil fuels or renewables), and the all-important question of how much to produce are not up for a vote; they are not made by the majority of citizens, but by capitalists who are unelected. A full-scale economic democracy is simply incompatible with capitalism.

Small countries, more subject to global capitalist powers, have even less ability to govern themselves. Pushed to austerity and anti-ecological decisions, democratically elected governments are fragile, as people get frustrated and can turn to authoritarian leaders. European countries have now in the same situation through the domination of the European Union.

Aristotle defined democracy very clearly as a constitution in which "the free-born and poor control the government – being at the same a majority," whereas in an oligarchy "the rich and better-born control the government – being at the same time a minority." By these definitions, we live in an oligarchy not a democracy, despite the vote..... And how

could it be otherwise given the extremes of inequality? Noam Chomsky has a nice acronym to describe our system of political democratic institutions within an oligarchy – he calls them RECDs (really existing capitalist democracies).

Despite these criticisms, however, I think it is very important not to reject totally the limited institutions of political democracy we have, or disparage the concept of democracy, as some on the Left are wont to do. That we can meet here and make these critiques, publish them and organize to change things is crucial. The absence of these democratic controls on China's development is one of the chief contributors to the ecological disaster their development is creating. Freedom of speech and association are essential to building the experience and capacities of working people necessary for democracy of a deeper kind. In our RECDs, we can not only talk, but organize around concrete issues that challenge vested interests like fossil fuel corporations. Sometimes we even win, as did the struggle to ban fracking in NY State - but, as NY now transports fracked gas from PA, the struggle goes on. The campaign to Divest NYC pension funds from fossil fuel corporations also won but we now need to ensure that the freed-up pension funds be invested in environmentally sustainable alternatives. Moreover, that any loss of jobs be compensated by living wage jobs. Eco-socialists need to push all our options – while supporting all struggles around concrete environmental issues, we have to press the philosophical idea that the Earth belongs to all of us, or rather to no one – we are only its beneficiaries and its stewards for future generations.

More important than specific wins, we should struggle to put these decisions under popular democratic control, thereby deepening democracy. Open public discussions are essential, with mechanisms in place that allow people to indicate what they want, but along with institutions that enable them to have *control*, not just consultation, over the representatives they choose to carry out their decisions. Participatory budgeting is an example of this, though very limited so far. Another good example, surprising because it comes from the US, is the public regulation of utilities. Though they are private, their profits and investments are capped, they're forced to subsidize the poor, and to fund environmental projects. Every aspect of their work is open to the public. More people should know about this and think about how to replicate it.

Critics would say it's utopian to imagine that "every cook can govern." But consider the near-catastrophe at Three Mile Island. The nuclear reactors were built and operated by private corporations without adequate information or any control by the people affected. In interviews with people in the community after the near-meltdown one woman said that if they had just explained the possible consequences of relying on nuclear reactors to get cheap energy, she would have preferred to hang her clothes out to dry. Explaining the implications of different options is the role of experts. Ordinary people can then evaluate those options according to their values and decide what to do. If the community's values had been in place, they would not have come to near-catastrophe.

For an exciting experiment along these lines see the article on Barcelona in Socialist Register 2018 [1] about a new kind of party that came out of social movements fighting the economic crisis. It â€˜"crowd-sourced" its code of ethics and uses new "digital-technological means of developing democratic experiments at the local and regional scale." Of course, they are still operating within a capitalist system that limits what they can do, but they give us ideas for bottom-up democratic and creative alternatives to capitalism.

As Marx envisioned it, a post-capitalist society is one in which "the associated producers rationally regulat[e] their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control... and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of their human nature." Beyond this, lay "the true realm of freedom, ...[concluding] the shortening of the work day is its basic prerequisite."

But this vision of a socialist society where the means of production are owned in common and democratically planned is far from universal on the left today. Such a vision requires public institutions at various levels of society in addition to non-governmental institutions. And state institutions are necessary in the transition. Many people today are distrustful of the state for good reasons and focus instead on what they call horizontal movements and on

non-state institutions. While this reflects a healthy democratic impulse, and such movements and institutions are crucial to building a better world, this focus is insufficient. We need governments, under democratic control, to effect the massive regulation we need to control producers who are destroying the environment. Putting demands on existing governments is an important way to build and unify a movement of diverse groups: workers, farmers, environmental groups and consumers, all of whom would benefit from sustainable industries. And under capitalism, who but the government can provide jobs, or income, to workers who will be displaced when destructive industries are shut down?

Consider the workers and their labor unions that support the building of gas pipelines because they want the jobs. Many of the proposed pipelines go close to rivers and are highly likely to pollute the water and the land, as well as increasing global warming. Obviously this is highly irrational from a social point of view, but the workers are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Within capitalism it is just very difficult for individuals to carry out rational life plans. Even corporations face structural constraints from the market system. In the 1990s, the CEO of British Petroleum adopted the slogan Beyond Petroleum and invested in solar energy. But 99% of their investments remained in fossil fuels and that percentage is increasing. So the decisions impacting us all must be taken out of the hands of corporations.

Others today focus on democratic ownership and control at the level of enterprises, but within a market system. This seems attractive but it has serious limitations. Some markets could exist in a society in which the crucial questions were decided democratically. *However, the crucial question regarding markets is the relative power of the market within the society in which the enterprises exist.* This is true both when worker-owned enterprises are put forward as a model of socialism - and even more so when we are speaking of cooperatives within capitalism but as leading to socialism. The largest and most successful cooperative in the world is Mondragon, often put forward as a model for socialists and a key strategic element of the struggle for socialism. A closer look should give one pause as the article on Mondragon in Socialist Register 2018 shows. [2]

Most importantly, even if we are talking of worker-owned enterprises in a post-capitalist, socialist society, as long as socialism is conceived as *basically a market system*, then it cannot resolve the multiple ecological crises we are facing. Worker-owned enterprises are constrained by the same political and economic forces of the market to continue producing the same stuff in the same way. Even many prominent environmental thinkers, Bill McKibben, e.g., seem to accept the logic of capitalist reproduction; they call for reliance on renewable energy sources rather than fossil fuels, but fail to mention that we need also to reduce growth. Even if we switched to cleaner greener cars, if we continue to produce ever more cars, the resources and materials for building, maintaining and transporting them would cause more pollution than we have at present. We need to contain our production and consumption within the limits of our finite planet, which means stepping outside the competitive market system. Thus, *whatever markets there are in socialism have to be brought under the control of institutions of rational democratic planning*.

At what level should the planning be done? That all depends... A focus on the local is very important; I always buy local when I can, and there are many inspiring examples of economic planning on the local level like the participatory budgeting developed in Brazil and extended in Barcelona or the agro-ecological practices of la Via Campesina. Many experts stress the importance of keeping the planning small because local knowledge is bound to be more reliable than far away experts' and people can develop trust and abide voluntarily by rules they themselves develop to protect natural resources. Due to lack of knowledge and cooperation, regulation by central governments has often led not to conservation but to destruction of natural resources. This advice is very important to keep in mind.

However, we must also recognize that many things simply cannot be accomplished in towns, or cities or regions or even countries. We need national clean air regulations or else states will compete for business by lowering environmental standards, and the same is true on an international level. Marx said in *The German Ideology* that socialism in one country was impossible. How much clearer that should be today! Climate problems do not respect national borders. The whole planet shares the air; particularly bad air pollution in California a few years ago was

traced to Asia. Deforestation in Latin America affects our air in North America and contributes to melting the polar ice caps. Dirty water in China leads to contaminated soil that leads to contaminated food that is then exported around the world. This is why climate scientists call for planet-wide curbs on emissions and ocean scientists say we need a Five-Year plan to save the oceans “plundered by over-fishing.” Nor do the human and political problems engendered by climate problems stay within national borders. Consider unemployment due to depleted resources, wars over scarce resources and the millions of refugees fleeing across the globe as a result. (Many of these social catastrophes particularly victimize women.)

Thus socialism would need more institutions of international governance, that is, planning and regulation, such as a United Nations of socialist societies, as well as local, regional and national institutions. The issue is not primarily whether planning is local, regional, national or even international, I contend, but what kinds of institutions enable rational democratic control from below and effectively address our environmental crisis. Our urgent task in this period is to create a global network of these grassroots institutions.

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[1] https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/28591

[2] https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/28592

[3] http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/about-us/rls-nyc/

[4] https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv