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Alternative Societies and Pluralist Socialism

Luke Martell


Alternative ways of living do not offer an escape from contemporary society, but a model for transforming it. We should learn from the many global examples of locally-specific lived utopias, and take seriously the challenge of scaling them up into a truly plural, intersectional, green, decolonial, international, democratic socialism.

I spent my formative years under the shadow of the cold war. Yet the times we are living through now are as dark and doom-laden as I have experienced. The impending catastrophic consequences of climate change, war and its effects, global inequality and poverty, the moving of far-right extremism into mainstream politics, and culture wars, greet us when we wake each day.

Gramsci’s recommendation was ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. It may seem a strange moment to say this, especially following my introductory remarks, but I think there are reasons to resurrect some optimism of the intellect too. This is not in an abstract way. It is based on theories, yes, but theories derived from thriving, multitudinous, living alternatives in many different places and at many different levels, better for humans and the environment. In my book Alternative Societies, I bring together a wide range of concrete examples and economic and social thinking from across the US, Mexico, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Middle East, and Africa, and assess contemporary alternatives, to discuss not how things are, but how they can be.¹

Alternative societies

These alternatives are not only potentially for the future, but are also already here. Some are being pursued out of ideological commitment, many from necessity. And the ones we can see here and now provide bases for alternative futures too.

The classic alternative to capitalism is communism. We can’t just dismiss past attempts at communism as not communist and carry on regardless. We need to look at what went wrong when it was tried (and never achieved communism), and what implications that has for alternatives today. One is to build from the bottom-up rather than state-down, and to experiment on a small scale within capitalism before attempting a grander scope. A micro version of communism is co-operative ownership (worker, consumer, community, housing, and other types), and other forms of alternative and participatory economy, such as outlined in the parecon (participatory economies) project. Co-ops go against alienation and exploitation and facilitate empowerment, co-operation, and equality. They face problems, such as insipient hierarchy and co-option by capitalism, but none that are essential and un-remediable by responses to tackle them. Parecon advocates self-management by the community.² It also addresses the classic socialist problem that pay based on need reduces incentives to be innovative and entrepreneurial. Parecon suggests keeping monetary
incentives but on a moral basis, for socially useful work and labour rather than based on power or market valuation. Of course, desire to serve the collective good is another incentive.

There are those who are advocating, and trying to live, a less-work and slower life, increasing autonomous time, with more space for citizenship and care, better quality of life, departing from the fast short-attention society, enabling greater depth, and based on satisfactions other than materialistic ones, so greener. Such approaches have gained extra traction and attraction after COVID-19. Slow approaches can be found in food, fashion, family, reading, media, urbanism, transport, work, and democracy. They can be pursued through individual lifestyle change. But not everyone can go slow. So, it requires government policy and, to be for everyone, wider cultural and structural change. The Universal Basic Income that could support a less-work society has been trialled internationally with many positive results.

Throughout the world, people are practising eco-localism and bioregionalism, especially in the Global South, sometimes driven by theory, but just as much by the need to secure reproduction of their lives in the face of the loss of welfare and wages. Women do a great deal of the work of social reproduction and feminism plays a big role in the analysis of such approaches. Surveillance capitalism and big tech have driven the building of digital alternatives: a decentralised federated internet (such as Mastodon which attracted an exodus from corporate Twitter of those appalled at the behaviour and beliefs of Elon Musk), and policies for a democratic and socially owned public media and tech, perhaps accompanied too by a bit of Luddite blocking and unmaking of surveillance technology. Likewise, food countercultures like freeganism and alternative social centres operate on the basis of alternative value-systems: anti-corporate, need over greed and waste, public over private spaces, community outreach, and green values.

Alternative education is a particularly fruitful area of practice. Influences include A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School, where attendance is voluntary and education as much about self-development as academic, outside the classroom as much as within. Pupils learn moral development through participation in school decision-making. Paolo Freire’s alternative to ‘banking education’ has been widely influential, about dialogue and democracy, developing from students’ real worlds rather than the teacher’s abstract curriculum. Ivan Illich advocated deschooling. Part of this is about recognising that much of education already takes place outside institutions, by people beyond the certificated, sometimes deliberately, sometimes organically. The complexity of these issues was brought to the fore during COVID-19 when the possibilities of education outside school were made clear, but so were the safeguarding and equity benefits of public education. The pandemic also highlighted the dangers of confinement to family structures. Intentional communities offer an alternative to the family and conventional parenting, often a hostile environment for LGBT communities and many women. They do not take away the care, love, and nurturing of (for some) the family but locate it in a context which works better for many.

The movement against prison and policing has also gained public attention recently. It suggests the possibility of alternative societies in which crime is prevented rather than punished. Decarceration looks to pre-colonial, non-western, and indigenous restorative --
They do not disengage from society. In fact, one problem is that they are not engaging with the mainstream and lead to conflicts and contradictions, and are more separatist. They step away from operating through adversarialism, punishing instead of solving. Alternative policing, practiced in indigenous and other communities, involves officers in building community and conflict resolution rather than crime fighting. Political institutions based on public ownership, redistribution, and welfare have long been pursued by social democrats and democratic socialists, rejuvenated under the firm left of Corbyn, Sanders, Podemos and others (I prefer ‘firm’ or ‘proper’ to ‘populist’ left). They are about collective and universal control for the good of society, welfare, and equality, rather than private ownership for private profit, polarisation of opportunity, and elite power. I am talking about democratic socialism, but social democracy can be a stepping stone.

There are concrete real, living, and breathing instances where such alternatives have been, or are being, pursued. There was the short-lived but important radical collective democracy of Fatsa in Turkey, and the embattled but more enduring democratic, green, and feminist Rojava in Syria, following the ideas of Murray Bookchin and Abdullah Öcalan. Permaculture and transition towns pursue local sustainability. Radical alternatives are practiced in the Zapatista region of Chiapas in Mexico and the communist village of Marinaleda in Spain. These examples are concerned with local sustainable social reproduction, gender equality, and work through bottom up, communal, pyramidal, confederal, multi-level, participatory democracy. Cooperation Jackson in the USA is an anti-racist initiative that combines co-operative action in civil society - concerned with ecology, housing, and poverty - with participation in mainstream politics.

Participatory budgeting has spread from Porto Alegre in Brazil throughout the world. Municipalisms such as Barcelona en Comú have devolved democracy by local state action, promoting dialogue, sometimes using tech to enable community participation in decision-making. In Preston, Cleveland, and many other places globally, community wealth building provides a way of keeping wealth local, for the community, a circular rather than extractive economy, and fostering co-operatives, side-lining international capital through partnerships between the local state and society. Many of these examples include the alternative forms I have mentioned: alternative types of justice to punishment; communal living alongside the family; alternative education; eco-localism; and participatory co-operative economies, for example.

**Pluralism in levels**

One criticism is that many such alternatives are too separatist. They step away from conflicts and contradictions, and are more concerned with escaping society than transforming it. They fail to engage with the mainstream and lead people away from shaping it. From this point of view, it is better to engage with society and transform it. By evading that, these alternatives are seen to be regressive and reactionary. They avoid the need and possibility of seizing political power and using it to reorganise all of society, and they avoid the opportunities of parliamentary power, legislation, and state power.

These criticisms are best answered not by rejecting the perspective they come from but by noting that the alternatives discussed contribute to what they are accused of undermining. They do not disengage from society. In fact, one problem is that it is difficult for them to do
so. The alternatives often must engage with capitalism and government and may even be co-opted. Many have to engage with markets and interact with the wider values of society. These alternatives create conflicts and contradictions within current society, rather than avoiding them. For instance, they bring in non-market and non-capitalist principles, in contrast with mainstream institutions and values. These concrete utopias are about contradiction and negation.

Furthermore, such alternatives are not stepping aside from society to engage in separate communities if they link up with politics. Polarisation between micro-utopian experimental politics and political-conflict politics is a false one. We should adopt a multi-level approach: social alternatives and political change, in civil society but also within formal politics. Micro-utopian prefigurative alternatives in civil society, coupled with formal politics, is part of changing society; it is not separate from or undermining such change.

Keir Starmer has a history of being down on protest and seems to see election to government as trumping other forms of change. But much social progress would not have occurred without protest, and alternatives operate at different levels. I think we should avoid the tendency of many on the left to opt for one approach over another: state action or local community, revolution or reform, utopia or materialism or pragmatism. One reason why, is that dichotomies between such approaches are often false. There are tensions between them, but they need not be mutually exclusive and antagonistic. Intellectuals can tend to draw stark oppositions. Activists, though, get involved in what offers hope and will often not only pursue different paths and levels of action at the same time but also see what can be brought about by them contributing to each other. Polarisation between micro-utopian experimental politics and political conflict politics is a false one. We should adopt a multi-level approach, social alternatives and political change, in civil society but also politics. Micro-utopian prefigurative alternatives in civil society coupled with politics is part of change in and with society, not separate from or undermining such change.

Community wealth building, Cooperation Jackson, co-ops, and other examples mentioned above, involve multi-level combined change. The recently-revived firm left focuses on state action but was built on existing social movements, for example anti-austerity. It works with and aims to facilitate participatory democracy in society. Furthermore, the world situation is so grim we need to try everything we can; not assume that alternatives are mutually opposed to one another, but try to combine and bring them together. Many radicals are lined up behind degrowth or the green new deal, for instance. We do not have the time or luxury to argue over the strains between these or choose one or the other. We must pursue both as best we can, with all the tensions involved. Generalising from what Oliver Eagleton says about the post-Corbyn left – ‘the priority must be to grow this movement through every available channel’.

Localisms need to be not just local, or their global impacts will be limited and there is the chance of parochialism, insularity, and competition. They must be scaled outwards and upwards. Higher-up political action can play a part in this. Corbyns’ office had a Community Wealth Building Unit, which could have made sure the proven success of the approach locally was pursued at a wider scope. Particular localist practices and co-ops need to be joined up with larger and wider networks and structures, so as to be more impactful in an
urgent sense on problems like climate change and to ensure equality and universality. This means national public ownership alongside co-ops. But public ownership needs to be democratic and, as democratic planners like Pat Devine have argued, extend participation beyond managers, government experts, and workers to a wider range of groups involving the broader community and all affected.\textsuperscript{11} So, a pluralist democratic socialism. There is quite a literature now on digital socialism (see, for instance, James Muldoon, in this volume). It argues that information technology allows democratic planning that pre-internet critics like Hayek saw as impossible.\textsuperscript{12} The Barcelona initiative mentioned previously includes participatory democracy by smartphone app, and at the same time, alternatives to surveillance in the way data is collected.

For anti-hierarchical politics, in fact, hierarchy can play its part. Radical democracy in Fatsa, Marinaleda, Barcelona, and participatory budgeting has been encouraged and built from the top as well as grown from the bottom. Political leadership and government have a role in setting up or facilitating democratic decentralised confederalism and bottom-up democracy. So, leadership and politics are not contradictory to bottom-up democracy. They are in tension with it. But they can also be an important part of its constitution. And when power is handed to the people by government, usually as the result of struggle by the people, that gives power away from mainstream politics yet also re-legitimises government amongst people in civil society, as has been found with participatory budgeting. Climate change needs widespread eco-localism, like the tens of thousands of bottom-up experiments in India, to take just one place, and throughout the world in ecological social reproduction, charted and practiced by activists like Ashish Kothari and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives network.\textsuperscript{13} Now and in the future, their forms of ecological economy are essential to avoid climate change and environment despoilation. But at the moment at least, climate change is such an emergency that radical centralised top-down state action is required too.

**Utopianism, materialism, and change**

One criticism is that alternatives are utopian, idealistic, and not materialist enough. They have dreams for the future separate from the present. They may even be compensatory, providing an escapism that allows people to get away from the way things are and so from reforming that.

But in fact, utopias grow out of material reality and the collectivities it generates, as Marxists who are sometimes (but certainly not always) anti-utopian point out. The alternatives I have outlined express the contradictions and interests of contemporary society, not just romantic dreams emerging from detached ideas. They are grounded in the conflicts of the current historical context, for instance of capitalism and its limits, as it is materially experienced by the subordinate and oppositional. So, they are part of society, not separate from it, material and not idealistic. These alternatives are tangible and attainable practices, not unachievable dreams or fantasies. They are a basis for social change and a better world, living and real, as much so as propagandising for change in the future that happens after capitalism.

Marx seemed conflicted about this, sometimes seeing co-ops under capitalism, for example, as regressive and other times as part of a basis for a communist future if allied with politics.
Historical materialism does not have a monopoly on materialism. Utopianism, contrary to what may be thought, offers it too.

We should not fear future utopias being totalitarian and ending change. For me, collectivism is a utopia. Nothing short of collective determination of our futures will allow us to tackle our collective problems. Yet, a utopia for me allows pluralism and alternatives within, so not totalitarian, or it is not a utopia. And democratic social control is a utopia for me. If you have pluralism and democratic control, then no utopia will be fixed. It will be diverse and change, so not involve an end to history and development.

**Socialism, liberalism, pluralism**

I think we need socialism to solve our problems. Socialism is about economic equality and about bringing society back under collective control. These are necessary for solving climate change, conflict, and social problems. The slow and low-work life, for example, is mainly possible for those who have the time and money. For it to become a viable societal alternative, rather than just an individual choice for some, then we need to reorganise society. This means putting power in the hands of the people collectively so they can run it for the collective good. They could, for instance, allocate profits not to external shareholders but to financing a shorter working week. It also means greater equality so the changes that emerge are available for the many and not just the few. Such collective ownership and economic equality are what distinguish socialist approaches from others.

Yet, socialist institutions are necessary but not sufficient. Socialism must be democratic and accept not everyone will be suited to it, so open to pluralism and liberal values like freedom. In fact, socialism can be better at liberalism than liberalism, providing the popular democracy and equality for all to be free. This involves being non-liberal to be liberal. Overriding property rights and rights to inequality are needed to enable freedom and rights for the powerless and poor as well as the rich. But this means socialism, whilst not taking liberalism *in toto* on board, being friendly to some of its values of diversity and individual freedom. Socialism has had to adjust to ecology, feminism, and intersectionality. That was (and continues to be) hard; being open to liberal principles (without accepting liberalism) involves just as much work.

I am not arguing for a middle way here between socialism and other approaches, or a plurality which includes socialism. We can’t overcome contrary approaches with new ways that go down the centre between the opposites or beyond them. We must live with the countervailing approaches as they express fundamental age-old principles and differences that cannot be escaped. But we should also not take sides completely on one pole to the decisive exclusion of the other. We need to manage different approaches, an agonistic as much as antagonistic process. This does not mean giving each side equal weight. It is about pluralism within an alternative of socialism rather than an equality of all alternatives in which socialism is one. Not pluralism with socialism (which is more like social democracy) but socialism with pluralism.

Many globally see socialism as a western Eurocentric idea involving externally thought up structures being imported and imposed, often through state forms not indigenous to parts.
of the world where they are introduced. So, socialism must not just be democratic and pluralist but also decolonial. This means not just accepting liberal diversity but also indigenous histories and traditions where people with local knowledge and their own value systems and traditions know best how to reproduce life in their place and in a way that is friendly to the environment. Contributions like Kothari et al’s discuss indigenous, post-development, social reproduction, concrete utopias in this vein. Yet, while those involved in these movements may not see what they are doing as socialism, Global South initiatives sometimes echo elements of socialism: equality and collective ownership and control.

So, dogmas need to retain their ideological analyses, critique, and principles but also be undogmatic. Another opposition that can be set aside is between revolution and reform. Revolutions can be made through insurrectionary political action but also through reforms such as gradual nationalisation that extends sectors of the economy under social ownership, as envisaged in the Meidner plan. They can be pursued through prefigurative forms of alternatives in current societies. This does not just base alternatives on persuasion about something yet to happen, but on the material experience, testing, and demonstration of alternative forms now. Raeksted and Gradin point out how prefigurative and Marxist politics need not be as opposed as they are made out to be. Meanwhile, revolutions that do not come through such gradualist ways can be ones where power is just shifted from economic power to bureaucratic power, even if that was never intended, so not very revolutionary.

**Alter-globalisation**

It seems unlikely that alter-globalisation -- globalisation that is alternative to neoliberal or even capitalist globalisation -- will come through global politics, global agreements, and at global levels. There are too many differences of material interest and ideology between states for this to be possible to a really substantial extent. We have seen how climate talks have been held back by such conflicts. Of course, we should persevere with global governance if we can. But you can make progressive international change through links between actors who do have things in common: what I call sub-global internationalism. Samir Amin and others have seen this happening through South-South cooperation, a form of internationalism below the global. The left needs to look to the global left aligning as much as to global government.

One way where alternative globalism can work is by opening our borders. There is an immense moral case for this on bases of obligations, equality, and freedom. It may have to be through this moral narrative rather than empirical evidence that the case for free movement is made, as throwing numbers at people often does not convince them. Yet, research undermines claims that immigrants take jobs, sponge off welfare, and undermine community. The evidence is for the opposite, and migration will be especially beneficial to all if accompanied by political and policy approaches that work with free movement and integration to make it happen rather than exploit popular prejudices to stay in power. The young and educated are much more open to international migration than the old. They also seem more amenable to anti- post- or non-capitalism. This may well be a cohort rather than lifecycle phenomenon, meaning an orientation the group keeps through life rather than loses with more conservative old age. If so, there is a growing social basis for alternatives to capitalism.
Conclusion

What all this amounts to is democratic socialism with collective ownership and control, and equality. I have argued for pluriversal possibilities, economically and socially, multilevel aspects to change, based on theory and practice, theory being inductive and grounded in practice, rather than imposed insensitively and inappropriately from outside, as often happens in relation to the Global South and other cases too. I argue that locally based, prefigurative experiments need to be respected for the specific knowledge and traditions they bring, yet to be effective should be scaled up and complemented by state-led and sub-global international political initiatives. The dangers of the latter can be countered by supporting and building from current-day utopian, decentralized, prefigurative experimentation. The result is a plural, multi-level, liberal, intersectional, green, decolonial, international, democratic socialism.

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2 See: https://participatoryeconomy.org/
7 For a good introduction on these issues see: Level, Abolition for the People, 6 October 2020, https://level.medium.com/abolition-for-the-people-397ef29e3ca5
10 Eagleton, op cit, p 191.
11 Pat Devine, Democracy and Economic Planning, Polity Press 1988 and in many articles by Devine since then.
12 Daniel E. Saros, Information Technology and Socialist Construction: The End of Capital and the Transition to Socialism, Routledge 2014 is a book-length study that has been followed by many others exploring the possibilities for digital socialism.
13 Kothari et al op cit and https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/.
14 Kothari et al op cit.
17 Samir Amin, Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World, Zed Books 1990