Towards an Alternative Society

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Alternative ways of living are less an escape from society and more a method for transforming it. We should learn from a global multitude of lived utopias, and scale them up to a plural, intersectional, green, decolonial, international, democratic socialism.

Climate change, war, poverty, extremism, and culture wars, greet us each day. Gramsci recommended ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. But we can have optimism of the intellect too, grounded in thriving alternatives globally. They are here and now and provide bases for alternative futures too.

Social Alternatives

The classic alternative to capitalism is communism. We should examine what went wrong in attempts at communism and the implications. One could be that we try alternatives bottom-up rather than top-down, another that we do so on a small scale within capitalism before attempting them on a grand scope. One micro-communism within capitalism is co-operative ownership. Coops go against alienation and exploitation and facilitate empowerment, co-operation, and equality. They experience problems, insipient hierarchy and co-option for example, but none that are un-remediable. Wider public ownership and redistribution are about collective control for the good of all society and equality, rather than private ownership for private profit, polarisation, and elite power.

Some advocate less-work and a slower life, with more free time for citizenship and care, departing from the fast short-attention society to greater depth, better quality of life, and based on non-materialistic satisfactions, so greener. This can be pursued through individual lifestyle change. But not everyone has the time or money to slow down. So, cultural, political, and structural change is required. World-wide, people practise eco-localism and bioregionalism for reproduction of their lives, especially women and in the Global South. Alternatives to big tech and surveillance capitalism include a decentralised federated or democratically owned media and internet.

There is alternative education, influenced by advocates like A.S Neill, Paolo Freire, and Ivan Illich: dialogical and democratic, developing from students’ experiences as much as teachers’ curricula, as much about self-development as academic, and beyond institutions and accredited instructors. Intentional communities do not take away the care, love, and nurturing of the family but locate them in alternative living arrangements which work better for some. Food countercultures like freeganism and alternative social centres are based on different value-systems: anti-corporate, for need over greed and waste, public over private spaces, community outreach, and green. Prison abolitionism implies the need for equal and
communal societies that reduce bases for crime. Indigenous, restorative justice addresses the roots of problems, building reconciliation and community, in place of adversarialism and punishment.

Such alternatives have been pursued in many places. There was the radical collective democracy of Fatsa in Turkey, and the more enduring democratic, green, and feminist Rojava in Syria. Radical alternatives are practiced in Chiapas in Mexico and the communist village of Marinaleda in Spain. Cooperation Jackson in the USA combines co-operatives in society with mainstream politics. Participatory budgeting has spread from Porto Alegre in Brazil through the world. Municipalisms like Barcelona en Comú devolve democracy by local state action and promote dialogue. In Preston, Cleveland, and beyond, community wealth building keeps investment local, fostering co-ops, in place of an extractive economy.

These examples include local sustainable social reproduction; co-ops; greater gender equality and anti-racism; accessible housing; alternative justice; communal living as well as the family; alternative education; and bottom up, pyramidal, confederal, multi-level, participatory democracy.

**Alternatives and their Limits**

Are these alternatives too separate, avoiding the political power needed to reorganise all of society? In fact, they do not disengage from society. They have to interact with capitalism and government. They create contradictions in society rather than stepping aside from it; non-market and non-capitalist principles contrast with mainstream institutions and values. They link up with formal politics. Polarisation between micro-experimentalism and organised politics is false. We should adopt a multi-level approach: social alternatives and politics.

Localisms should not be just local, or we will get insularity and competition and their global impact will be limited. They must be scaled outwards and upwards. Higher up political action can play its part in this. Local alternatives can then impact on urgent problems like climate change, and we can ensure equality and universality across society. This entails national public ownership. But public ownership should be democratic and extend participation beyond managers, experts, and workers, to the broader community. So, a pluralist democratic socialism.

Alternative globalisation is unlikely through global politics. There are too many clashes of interest and ideology for radical agreements at this level. But you can make progressive international change through links between actors who do have things in common: sub-global internationalism, as in South-South cooperation. One way we can have alternative globalism is in the free movement of people. Open borders are morally right for reasons of obligations, equality, and freedom. The young and educated are more open to international migration than the old, and to post- or non-capitalism. This may be a cohort rather than lifecycle phenomenon, meaning they hold this perspective through life rather than becoming conservative with age. This creates an expanding social base for alternatives to capitalism.
Pluralist socialism

Socialism is about economic equality and bringing society under collective control. These are necessary for solving climate change, social problems, injustice, and conflict. But socialism must be democratic and accept not everyone will be suited to it. Socialism can be better at liberalism than liberalism, providing the popular democracy and equality for all to be free. But this means socialism, whilst not adopting liberalism, being friendly to pluralism and individual freedom; socialism with pluralism rather than pluralism with socialism.

For some, socialism is Eurocentric. It must be decolonial, accepting indigenous knowledge and values for post-development and the ecological reproduction of life. Yet, Global South initiatives do sometimes echo values of socialism, such as equality and collective ownership and control.

What I have outlined amounts to a democratic socialism of collective ownership and equality. It involves plurality, multi-level change, and theory grounded in practice rather than imposed. Local prefigurative experiments must be scaled up and combined with state-led and sub-global international politics. The result is plural, multi-level, liberal, green, intersectional, decolonial, international, democratic socialism.