

The Anarchist Method:

An Experimental Approach to Post-Capitalist Economies

By Wayne Price



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There are various opinions on the question of what a libertarian socialist economy would look like. By “libertarian socialism,” I include anarchism and libertarian Marxism, as well as related tendencies such as guild socialism and parecon—views that advocate a free, cooperative, self-managed, nonstatist economy once capitalism has been overthrown. Before directly discussing these programs, alternate visions of communal commonwealths, it is important to decide on the appropriate method. Historically, two methods have predominated, which I will call the utopian-moral approach and the Marxist-determinist approach (neither of these terms is meant to be pejorative). I will propose a third approach, which has been called the “method of anarchism” (or “of anarchy”).

The utopian-moral method goes back to the earliest development of socialism, before either Marxism or Bakuninist anarchism developed. It was the method of Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, Fourier, Cabet, and later of Proudhon. A thinker starts with a set of moral values by which the present society may be condemned. Then the author moves on to envision social institutions which could embody these values. (These writers, pioneers of socialism, communism, and anarchism, did not call themselves “utopians,” but saw themselves as “scientific” thinkers.)

A current example of utopian-moral methods is the program of “parecon” (short for “participatory economics”), originally developed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel.¹ Typically, in the first section of Albert’s book, Parecon, he poses the key question, “What are our preferred values regarding economic outcomes and how do particular economic institutions further or inhibit them?”² He works out a set of desirable values and then considers how an economy could be organized to carry them out.

The advantages of this method should be apparent. What Albert wants and why he wants it is transparent. It may be fairly argued for or against. Pareconists offer a yardstick by which to judge potential economies, as well as real ones, so that radicals do not claim to be for freedom but accept some totalitarian monstrosity.

However, there are also problems with the utopian-moral method. Various thinkers start with more-or-less the same values (e.g., freedom, cooperation, equality, democracy/ self-management, and the development of each person’s potentialities). Yet they propose quite different models of a new economy. How to decide among these models?

Also it could be argued that it is authoritarian for radicals today to make decisions about how other people will organize their lives in the future. The more precise and concrete the model, the more this is a problem. Not surprisingly, quite a number of historic utopian models were very undemocratic in structure (speaking of Owen, Fourier, Cabet, and Saint-Simon). This is not true of the parecon model, but a modern version is in B.F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1976), an imagined socialist commune with a dictatorship by behavioral psychologists (!).

Finally there is a problem in that the utopian approach starts from values rather than from an analysis of how capitalist society functions. There is really no necessary connection between any particular model and the dynamics of capitalism (besides the moral critique). The visions of the possible futures do not point to any strategies for getting to these futures. Since they propose a drastic change in society, they may be seen as implying a social revolution. But it is certainly possible to adopt some utopian model and believe that it can be reached by gradual changes, such as building various alternative institutions until capitalism can be peacefully replaced—that is, by following a gradual, pacifistic, and reformist strategy. A program that does not say whether to be revolutionary or reformist is not much of a guide to action.

The main alternate method has been that of Marxist-determinism. Marx and Engels valued the preceding “utopian socialists” for various things, such as their criticism of capitalism and some of their proposals. But the original Marxists claimed that another method was needed. It was, they thought, necessary to analyze how capitalism was developing, including its main

drive mechanism: the capital-labor relationship in production. This provided the basis of a strategy: the working class revolution. It indicated the emergence of a new society out of that revolution. This relationship was their main interest. Marx and Engels only mentioned the nature of the new society in passing remarks, scattered throughout their writings—such as a few paragraphs in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program*.³

In this work, Marx discussed the nature of communism, including at first paying workers with labor credits and later providing goods freely upon need. Yet such ideas were not advocated nor made as speculation, but stated as factual predictions. This is what would happen, he was saying; human choice seemed to be irrelevant. The goal of Marx and Engels was not to implement a new social system. It was to see that the working class overthrew the capitalist class and took power for itself. Once this happened, the historical process would take care of further social development.

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin regarded himself as praising Marx when he wrote, “Marx treated the question of communism in the same way as a naturalist would treat the question of the development of, say, a new biological variety, once he knew that it had originated in such and such a way and was changing in such and such a definite direction... It has never entered the head of any socialist to ‘promise’ that the higher phase of the development of communism will arrive; ... [it is a] forecast that it will arrive...”⁴

The Marxist-determinist method also has distinct advantages. It is tied to an economic theory. It has an analysis of what forces are moving in the direction of a new society and what are blocking them. It leads to a strategy that identifies a specific change agent (the working class, leading other oppressed groups). There are strands of autonomist Marxism which interpret Marxism in a libertarian, antistatist fashion which overlaps with class struggle anarchism.

On the other hand, like a naturalist’s study of an organism’s development, there is no moral standard, just a “forecast” (even though, in fact, Marx’s work is saturated with moral passion; but this is not the system). So when Marxist-led revolutions produce state-capitalist totalitarianisms that murder tens of millions of workers and peasants, very many Marxists support this as the result of the historical process which has created “actually existing socialism.” Marx and Engels would undoubtedly have been horrified by what developed in the Soviet Union and other so-called Communist countries. But a method without a moral standard made it difficult for Marxists to not support these states.

Both the utopian-moral and Marxist-determinist methods have advantages and weaknesses. Let me suggest an alternate approach to post-capitalist, post-revolu-

tionary economic models. This has been raised by anarchists in the past. It starts from the doubt that every region and national culture will choose the same version of libertarian socialist society. It is unlikely that every industry, from the production of steel to the education of children, could be managed in precisely the same manner.

Kropotkin proposed a flexible society based on voluntary associations. These would create “an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees, local, regional, national, and international—temporary or more or less permanent—for all possible purposes: production, consumption and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements...and so on...”⁵

Perhaps the clearest statement of this flexible and experimental anarchist method was made by Errico Malatesta, the great Italian anarchist (1853-1932). To Malatesta, after a revolution, “probably every possible form of possession and utilization of the means of production and all ways of distribution of produce will be tried out at the same time in one or many regions, and they will combine and be modified in various ways until experience will indicate which form, or forms, is or are, the most suitable... So long as one prevents the constitution and consolidation of new privilege, there will be time to find the best solutions.”⁶ Malatesta continued, “For my part, I do not believe there is ‘one solution’ to the social problems, but a thousand different and changing solutions in the same way as social existence is different and varied in time and space.”⁷

We cannot assume, he argued, that, even when the workers have agreed to overthrow capitalism, they would agree to create immediately a fully anarchist-communist society. What if small farmers insist on being paid for their crops in money? They may give up this opinion once it is obvious that industry will provide them with goods, but first they must not be coerced into giving up their crops under conditions they reject. In any case a compulsory libertarian communism is a contradiction in terms, as he pointed out.

“After the revolution, that is, after the defeat of the existing powers and the overwhelming victory of the forces of insurrection, what then? It is then that gradualism really comes into operation. We shall have to study all the practical problems of

life: production, exchange, the means of communication, relations between anarchist groupings and those living under some kind of authority... And in every problem [anarchists] should prefer the solutions which not only are economically superior but which satisfy the need for justice and freedom and leave the way open for future improvements...”⁸

Whatever solutions are tried, he is saying, they must be non-exploitative and nonoppressive. They must “prevent the constitution and consolidation of new privilege” and “leave the way open for future improvements.” It is precisely this flexibility, pluralism, and experimentalism which characterizes anarchism in Malatesta’s view and makes it a superior approach to the problems of life after capitalism.

“Only anarchy points the way along which they can find, by trial and error, that solution which best satisfies the dictates of science as well as the needs and wishes of everybody. How will children be educated? We don’t know. So what will happen? Parents, pedagogues and all who are concerned with the future of the young generation will come together, will discuss, will agree or divide according to the views they hold, and will put into practice the methods which they think are the best. And with practice that method which in fact is the best will in the end be adopted. And similarly with all problems which present themselves.”⁹

Others have pointed to the experimental approach as central to the anarchist program. For example, Paul Goodman, the most prominent anarchist of the 60s, wrote: “I am not proposing a system... It is improbable that there could be a single appropriate style of organization or economy to fit all the functions of society...”¹⁰ Or, as Kropotkin put it, an anarchist “society would represent nothing immutable... Harmony would... result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitudes of forces and influences, and this adjustment would be the easier to obtain as none of the forces would enjoy a special protection from the state.”¹¹

Issues Raised by Differing Models of Post-Capitalism

There are a number of problems that post-capitalist visions have to address and the ways that they address these issues are what differentiate them. The approach I have raised does not

insist on any one answer to each issue, but suggests that different answers may be tried in different regions at different times. However, the answers proposed by different models provide us with ideas of possible responses to these problems. That is, the utopian-moral and Marxist-determinist models may be treated as “thought experiments,” providing suggestions that may be experimented with.

A key problem is the method of coordination in the post-capitalist economy. Three answers have been proposed: a market, central planning, and some sort of noncentralized planning. First, there has been proposed what might be called “decentralized market socialism.” It would be for an economy of democratically managed producer (worker-run) cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, family farms, municipal enterprises, and very small businesses that would compete in a market. Such a model has been advocated by various reform socialists who are concerned with the failures of state-managed economies.¹² It has been advocated by Right Greens, Catholic distributionists, nonsocialist decentralists, and others.¹³ The Yugoslavian economy under Tito had something like this (under the overall dictatorship of the Communist Party).

In theory such a system would not be capitalist, because there is no capitalist class that owns the means of production and there is no proletariat that sells its ability to work to a separate capitalist class. But, however democratic each enterprise, the population cannot be said to actually manage the overall economy in a democratic way. It would really be run by the uncontrollable forces of the market. There are bound to be business cycles, unemployment, and a distinction between more prosperous and poorer enterprises and regions (effects which were seen in “Communist” Yugoslavia).

An alternative would be some degree of central planning, as Marx seems to have assumed. In a nonstatist society, the central authority would be answerable to an association of popular councils and assemblies.¹⁴ Castoriadis imagined that there could be a central “plan factory,” which would create an overall plan.¹⁵ Somehow, he believed, this could be consistent with libertarian socialism of self-managing workers’ councils. Anarcho-syndicalists and guild socialists have also tended toward a centralized economy, managed by democratic unions. All sorts of representative institutions can be proposed for democratic central planning, although they all have

the difficulty of important decisions being made outside of the direct control of the working population.

The third suggestion is that of a democratically planned, but not centralized, cooperative economy, “the idea that production could be directly coupled to individual and social need through democratic assemblies (or cybernetic networks) of workers and consumers...”¹⁶ Parecon is a model of such a nonmarket, noncentralized system. Planning would be carried out through cycles of back-and-forth negotiations among producer and consumer councils using the internet.

In a pluralist, experimental, post-capitalist world, different regions might experiment with different types of economic coordination. Regions might try out mixtures of different models. For example, even in the parecon model there is an element of central planning in the “facilitation boards,” which help to smooth along the planning process. Even in decentralized market socialism, presumably there would be some sort of overall regulation, as there is under capitalism, if not by a state then by some communal agency. Takis Fotopoulos proposes “a stateless, moneyless, and marketless economy” but one which includes “an artificial market” for a “non-basic needs sector...that balances demand and supply...”¹⁷

A related issue is the size of the economic unit. While economic planning by capitalist states is on a national basis, revolutionary socialist-anarchists generally regard this as inappropriate to a post-capitalist economy. As internationalists, we are aware that the world is being knit together by imperialist globalization. At the same time we know that much of this worldwide centralization is not due to technical needs but to the need of capitalists to control natural resources, to dominate world markets, and to exploit the poorest workers in order to make the biggest profits. To end the rule of states and bureaucracies, anarchists want as much as possible of local, face-to-face democracy. This requires a degree of economic decentralization. Indeed, any sort of economic planning would be easier, and easier to make democratic, the smaller the units. Finally it would also be easier to keep production and consumption in balance with nature, the smaller the units are.¹⁸

Traditionally anarchists have sought to balance national and international association with the need for local community by advocating federations and networks. There can be no hard

and fast rule about how centralized or decentralized an economy has to be. As Paul Goodman put it, “We are in a period of excessive centralization... In many functions this style is economically inefficient, technologically unnecessary, and humanly damaging. Therefore we might adopt a political maxim: to decentralize where, how, and how much [as] is expedient. But where, how, and how much are empirical questions. They require research and experiment.”¹⁹

Murray Bookchin advocated an economy based on communal communes similar to the Israeli kibbutzim. This was part of his “libertarian municipalist” model.²⁰ Another version is raised by Fotopoulos²¹ and it is also discussed as “Scheme II” in Goodman & Goodman.²² The community as a whole would be an enterprise and, through its town meetings, would make decisions about economic planning. This would not prevent communities from forming federations on a regional, national, and international level. They could coordinate their plans and exchange goods, services, and ideas.

Parecon has its own twist on this issue. Workplaces would be managed by workers’ councils. Consumption would be organized through consumers’ community councils. These are relatively small, face-to-face groupings. But the unit which is covered by the final plan is primarily the nation (which, in the case of the United States, if it still existed, would be much of a continent). In fact, Albert specifically rejects “green bioregionalism” and any notion of prioritizing small institutions or local “self-sufficiency.”²³ (Actually decentralists do not advocate complete community self-sufficiency, but enough dependence on local and regional resources to be relatively self-reliant, within broader federations and networks).

The issue of size is directly related to that of technology. Just as is true of economic institutions, so productive technology would have to be flexible, pluralistic, and experimental. Machinery and the methodology of production have been organized by the processes of capitalism (and militarism) to serve its interests. Technology would have to be completely reorganized and redeveloped over time to meet the needs of a new society. Immediately after a revolution, the workers will need to begin to rework the process of production (machinery included) to do away with the distinction between order-givers and order-takers,

to produce useful goods, to be in balance with the ecology, and to make a decentralized but productive economy possible.²⁴

Just how these will be done would require a great deal of rethinking and trial-and-error.²⁵

The parecon model does not include any reconsideration of technology, but does call for the reorganization of work to create “balanced job complexes.” Occupations would be broken down and reconfigured so that individual jobs would include both interesting and boring tasks, both decision-making and tedious aspects. (This has been described by Marxists and anarchists as the abolition of the division of labor between mental and manual labor).

This approach is distinct from either the technophobes, who want to reject all technology beyond that of hunter-gatherer society, and those who accept modern technology as capitalism has created it. Both these views overlook how flexible technology might be in a totally different society.

Another key question facing a post-capitalist economic economy is that of reward for work. There have been proposals for paying workers for their work in some sort of money or credit, which is used to acquire goods and services. Pareconists propose paying workers for the “intensity” and “duration” of their labor, that is, how hard and how long they work, as judged by co-workers. In *Walden Two*, the ruling psychologists were able to increase or decrease the amount of credits earned for any particular job to motivate members to do unpleasant tasks.²⁶

By contrast, in a fully communist economy, work would be done only for the pleasure of doing it, or because people feel a duty, or because of social pressure (people do not want their neighbors to call them “lazy bums”). Consumption will be a right, based only on human need and unrelated to effort. Kropotkin is usually understood as advocating such a communist system after a revolution. Bookchin also proposed going straight to a free communist economy.

Various thinkers have proposed a split system. Almost every socialist system, including parecon, provides free goods for children, the ill, and retired older adults. Fotopoulos advocates a basic needs sector and a non-basic needs sector, the

first to be treated as free communism and the second as having goods to be earned through work.²⁷ Similarly Paul and Percival Goodman propose dividing the economy into a basic economy, which provides a guaranteed minimum subsistence (food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and transportation), and a separate economy to take care of everything else.²⁸ Even if the non-basic needs sector was market-like, there would be no reserve army of the unemployed, since everyone would have at least the guaranteed minimum to live on.

This too is an area where different regions might try out different methods.

This leads to the question of whether to plan for a transitional economy, whether to expect two or more stages of post-capitalist economic development. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx wrote, “We are dealing here with a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but as it emerges from capitalist society...still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society...”²⁹ He distinguished between this “first phase of communist society” and “a more advanced phase of communist society.”³⁰ These are both communism, to Marx, because even the first phase is a “cooperative society based on common ownership of the means of production.”³¹ (For some reason, Lenin renamed the first phase “socialism” and only the final phase “communism”).

In Marx’s first phase, people would be rewarded for the number of hours worked with labor-time certificates which they can exchange for goods according to how many hours went into making each good. While vastly more just and equal than capitalism, this still has bourgeois limitations since workers have unequal capacities and unequal needs. When productivity has vastly expanded and human abilities are further developed, it will be possible to advance to the higher stage of communism, which will function according to the standard, “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.”

We can add that in poorer, less-industrialized nations, a post-revolutionary society would not be able to even reach the lower phase of communism (socialism) by itself. It would, however, be able to take steps toward socialism by such means as replacing the state with a council system and replacing corporations with self-managed cooperatives. Yet it might be

unable to abolish money or it may have to make other compromises with capitalism. Meanwhile it would do all it could to help the revolution to spread internationally, especially to the industrialized, richer nations, in order to get economic aid for industrializing in its own way. (This concept was raised by Lenin³² and Trotsky³³; I have “translated” it into libertarian socialism, so to speak).

While Marx’s views are well-known, less well-known are the similar views of Bakunin. According to his close comrade, James Guillame, Bakunin believed, “We should, to the greatest extent possible, institute and be guided by the principle, From each according to his [sic] ability, to each according to his need. When thanks to the progress of scientific industry and agriculture, production comes to outstrip consumption... everyone will draw what he needs from the abundant social reserve of commodities... In the meantime each community will decide for itself during the transition period the method they deem best for the distribution of the products of associated labor.”³⁴

Even Kropotkin, author of anarchist-communism, believed that right after a revolution goods would not be free to all able-bodied adults but would only be guaranteed to those who were willing to work for a set amount of time. Only as productivity increased would it be possible to make goods available to all regardless of labor.³⁵

The realism of a transitional approach should be obvious given that we would indeed be going into a cooperative, nonprofit economy straight from capitalism. Modern technology is potentially more productive than either Marx or Bakunin could have imagined. Yet a post-revolutionary generation would still have to develop the poorer majority of the world in a humane and ecological fashion. Also, they would have to rebuild the technology and cities of the industrialized countries in a self-managed and sustainable way. Therefore, I doubt that there could be an immediate leap into full communism.

However, the “transitional stage” concept has been used by Marxists to justify all sorts of horrors, making excuses for Stalinist totalitarianism. This is not what Bakunin, or even Marx, had in mind. It shows the need for a vision with moral values to judge a new society.

Neither Marx nor Bakunin/Guillame proposed a mechanism for going from a transitional phase to full communism. One possibility might be to use the idea of a split economy (a basic communism and a non-basic needs sector). As productivity grows, the free communist sector might be deliberately expanded, until it gradually includes all (or most) of the economy.

Rather than a series of transitional periods, it may be most productive to think in terms of an experimental, pluralist, and decentralized society, in which different parts face the problems caused by the transition out of capitalism and deal with them in differing ways. A libertarian socialist society would always be “transitional” in that it would always be changing, always in transition to a more harmonious, freer, and more egalitarian society. It would never reach perfection, since that is not a human goal, but it would continually be changing, refining itself, readapting to new circumstances in a never-ending spiral of experimental improvement.

Notes

¹ See Michael Albert, *Moving Forward: Program for a Participatory Economy* (Edinburgh/San Francisco: AK Press, 2000); Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life after Capitalism* (London/NY: Verso Books, 2003); and Robin Hahnel, *Economic Justice and Democracy: From Competition to Cooperation* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

² Albert, *Parecon*, 28.

³ Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in *The First International and After: Political Writings*, vol. 3, ed. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 339–359.

⁴ V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol. 2, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 348, 357–8. Lenin’s emphasis.

⁵ Peter Kropotkin, *The Essential Kropotkin*, ed. E. Capouya and K. Tompkins (New York: Liveright, 1975), 108.

⁶ Errico Malatesta, *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1984), 104. My emphasis.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 151–152.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹ Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy* (London: Freedom Press, 1974), 47.

¹⁰ Paul Goodman, *People or Personnel: Decentralizing and the Mixed System* (New York: Random House, 1965), 27.

¹¹ Kropotkin, *The Essential Kropotkin*, 108.

¹² See Frank Roosevelt and David Belkin, ed., *Why Market Socialism? Voices from Dissent* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).

¹³ For example, see Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁴ See Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State; Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

¹⁵ See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings: Vol 2, 1955–1960*, ed. and trans. D. A. Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988).

¹⁶ David Belkin, “Why Market Socialism? From the Critique of Political Economy to Positive Political Economy,” in *Why Market Socialism?*, ed. F. Roosevelt and D. Belkin (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 8.

¹⁷ Takis Fotopoulous, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy* (London/NY: Cassell, 1997), 256–257.

¹⁸ For a compendium of decentralist arguments, see Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980).

¹⁹ Goodman, *People or Personnel*, 27.

²⁰ See Janet Biehl with Murray Bookchin, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal/NY: Black Rose Books, 1998).

²¹ See Fotopoulous, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*.

²² See Paul Goodman and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (New York: Columbia University Press/A Morningside Book: 1960).

²³ Albert, *Parecon*, 80–83.

²⁴ See Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*.

²⁵ For ideas, see Goodman and Goodman, *Communitas*; George McRobie, *Small is Possible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); and E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row/Perennial Library Schumacher, 1973).

²⁶ See B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1976).

²⁷ See Fotopoulous, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*.

²⁸ See Goodman and Goodman, *Communitas*.

²⁹ Marx, “Critique,” 346.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

³² See V. I. Lenin, “The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It,” in *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol. 2 (Moscow; Progress Publishers, 1970).

³³ See Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

³⁴ James Guillaume, “On Building the New Social Order”, in *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 362.

³⁵ See Kropotkin, *The Essential Kropotkin*.