

On the Basic Income Law, Economic Democracy, Participatory Economics, and the Importance of the Commons in the 21st Century: Further thoughts on an alternative philosophy of social change

By R.C. Smith

Introduction

Over the past few weeks I've had the privilege of engaging with a number of people both in formal discussions and on Heathwood's comment boards regarding a range of issues. These issues span from the structural problems of capitalism and the idea of the basic income law through to an alternative philosophy of social change, the questionable meaning of 'social progress', and potential social-economic alternatives. The following article, which I've broken down into a few different sections, carries forward these discussions in light of arguments made in: Gunn & Wilding, '[Occupy as Mutual Recognition](#)', '[Revolutionary or Less-Than-Revolutionary Recognition](#)'; Gunn, Wilding & Smith, '[Alternative horizons – understanding Occupy's politics](#)'; Michael Ott, '[Something's Missing: A Study of the Dialectic of Utopia in the theories of Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch](#)'; as well as R.C. Smith, '[A series of essays on an alternative philosophy of social change](#)', '[In defense of Occupy's politics](#)', '[Russell Brand, the question of revolution and why we need more than an abstract, grand narrative of social change](#)'.

I. One of the most fundamental philosophical problems of the 21st Century

It appears to me that in majority of discussions about life after capitalism and possible social-economic alternatives, a very familiar anxiety tends to surface and resurface. This anxiety, I argue, is both existential and social in nature. It is the result of what I describe as one of the most fundamental philosophical problems of the 21st Century: namely that if capitalism, as a system of in-direct domination, emerged in history as an alternative to systems of direct domination; how might we then formulate, in the present, a truly progressive and emancipatory alternative without reproducing direct or in-direct systems of domination?

Whenever discussions take place about life after capitalism and possible future experimentation with alternative political-economic systems, especially in the context of the above criteria, the source of the anxiety that surfaces in many people seems to be either in the form of a scar left by the indescribable failings of Soviet Communism, or the existential fear often associated with the future and the unknown, or both.

Take for instance comments I frequently hear about how 'the end of Communism represents the end of the debate about Capitalism', or 'we either have capitalism or systems of direct domination', or 'anything outside of capitalism represents the sort of pure utopian thought that inspired so many socialist failings'. While I consider these assertions to be widely mistaken or off the mark, particularly with regards to how they imply a sort of (false) universalisation of the system of capital, which, in the context of so many capitalist crises is as utopian as the worst of socialist movements – the fact remains that there are alternatives to capitalism that do not fit within the scope of the political failings of old.

Conversely, in a recent article Slavoj Žižek presents a similar line of enquiry, quizzing in almost identical terms as I did in a past paper on a critique of Western politics that:

“In the market economy, relations between people can appear as relations of mutually recognised freedom and equality: domination is no longer directly enacted and visible as such. What is problematic is [Ayn] Rand’s underlying premise: that the only choice is between direct and indirect relations of domination and exploitation, with any alternative dismissed as utopian.”

While I have some issue with Žižek’s phrasing that relations can appear as ‘mutually recognitive’ within contemporary capitalist society, arguing instead that it is actually the opposite – that capitalist relations can be widely observed today as being of one-way, ‘contradictory recognition’ (Gunn, Wilding 2013) and that there is an obvious, distinguishable difference between situations where ‘mutual recognition’ reigns and the standard mode of relations in capitalist society – his basic point nevertheless remains healthy. In capitalist society money serves to mediate social relations between individuals. Adorno once observed, for example, how the capitalist phenomenon of ‘universal exchange’ functions as a principle mode of social relations, replacing direct systems of domination with an indirect one. This is what makes the system of capital so resistant to alternative movements: its primary mode of relations, which we could summarise in light of the capitalist principle of ‘universal exchange’, essentially mediates everything today.

As I asked in *Consciousness and Revolt* and in a previous paper on dominating social systems: what is the power of capitalism, as an ideology, if not in how as a total system it gives one a sense of (false) ultimate security or dominant Order, of knowing where one stands in the world by way of its absolute relation to all things?

Unless one completely cuts oneself off from society, there is very little truly public space left that is not affected by the system of capital. We can consider any number of critiques of mass media, popular culture, art, education (and so forth), but ultimately the problem boils down to the universalising propensity of the coercive logic (i.e., instrumental reason, positivism) of capitalism as dominant, essentially totalitarian system that pervades almost all aspects of life.

This is not to say that there aren’t pockets of space left in society, in our communities, in our relationships, in our alternative education facilities, in our higher education institutions, that are resistant to capitalism. However fragile, pockets of space do exist and perhaps these pockets of space attest to the resilience of so many people trying to carve out an alternative in whatever particular field or sphere of society they tend to inhabit.

My point, however, is that despite my deep distaste for Ayn Rand’s (capitalist) philosophy, she was right about at least one thing: free market capitalism, with its concept of ‘universal exchange’, historically takes the place of direct domination. While we can easily refute Rand’s conclusion that our only option is the rule of money or direct domination – that without money direct domination will need to be restored – I do agree with Žižek that there is a more fundamental lesson here. As Žižek remarks, “one can criticize money as an alienated form,” but the more pressing question is “how can we actually organize complex social interaction outside

money without direct domination?” 20th Century Stalinism was one attempt to do just this: suspend the market. The result, as we all know, was inexplicable suffering and barbarity. Zizek captures this point when he reflects, moreover: “isn’t the tragedy of 20th century Stalinism that precisely they tried to suspend, not money, but the market, and what was the result?” Ultimately we were left with a bloodied “re-assertion of brutal direct domination.”

So where does that leave us theoretically and how might we begin to seek out an alternative to free market capitalism? Zizek recently argued in a rather vague manner that we should replace the capitalist mode of relations with “a proper form of the communist organisation of production and exchange”. What this means exactly only Zizek can say. Furthermore, as much as it is easy to criticise the likes of Rand and defenders of capitalism, it is also quite easy to criticise contemporary communist movements, who urge for revolution without offering any real foundational, holistic vision as to what an alternative might look like on a micro and macro level. What most modern communist theories also seem to lack is a foundational philosophy of social change – that is a holistic, multidimensional, interdisciplinary and integrative approach – as communism today tends to depend primarily on an archaic concept of revolution that is symbolised by violently overthrowing the present Order and planting a red flag on parliament hill.

In response to certain theories and attitudes on the ‘left’ that criticise citizens/voters who don’t support the communist cause, arguing that they’re apathetic or stupid and a direct symptom of the system that needs to be torn out and rewritten, I reply: since when has any communist theory given the ‘average citizen’ reason to feel confident and secure, given that the typically abstract nature of communist proposals? Against these theories and attitudes, I have seen no evidence that justifies pigeonholing the ‘average citizen’ as stupid or apathetic with regards to the issue of communism. Rather, I’ve seen evidence to the contrary: that many people are smarter than what so many far-removed theories on the ‘left’ give credit.

Moreover, it is the ‘left’ today that exists in delusion, apathetic to the concerns of the ‘average citizen’. It is the left that needs to change its approach and fundamental philosophy. If the communist and socialist movements of old are no longer trusted by a vast majority of people, this is because in history they have left little reason for trust, often historically betraying their own manifesto promises and resulting in unspeakable barbarity. Until the communist movement as a whole moves beyond its many false Idols and the proposing of abstract ideas and starts advocating actual concrete, viable alternatives, it will never gain any ground. With that said, beside the lack of provision of any concrete, viable alternatives: its basic theories of social organisation, which historically contain hierarchical and authoritarian inclinations; its basic philosophy of the societal process of historical change, which continues to be naive and unsustainable; its archaic politics and instrumentality regarding the use of traditional circuits of political power – in what way and for what reason is there enough actual theoretical and practical substance on a foundational level to consider communism (as presently defined) an actual option in the 21st Century?

If the ‘average citizen’ (for lack of a better word) today intuitively feels that capitalism is the best option for them in history, because its system of exchange and primary mode of relations offers the least amount of coercion and has allowed over time the most liberties, scientific and medical

advancements, as well as an overall improvement of basic living conditions – they're not asserting this view as 'mere ideologues'. Most people in this regard are not speaking from a purely ideological perspective. They're pointing toward a certain grain of truth, one that is extremely hard to deny.

Indeed, capitalist society has offered a lot 'progress' in many different areas of life. It has provided more basic existential and social comforts; it has provided rapid advancement in the sciences and in medicine; it has allowed more people to live more comfortably than ever before. I take it that for this reason when engaged in public discourse about capitalism and the need for an alternative, I am more often than not asked: 'why should we give this up?'

The fact remains that – and herein resides my basic ideology critique – while capitalism has offered many social advancements, it has also resulted in its own horrible and indescribable suffering (socially, environmentally, psychology, etc.). One can always discern the existence of ideology precisely in the refusal to accept the destructive conditions of capitalism, in the refusal to see that we can still do better and that there's a fundamental need today to reconceptualise the modern political-economy.

For many readers of this paper, I do not need to explain how capitalism has result in increasing social injustice, exploitation, violence, environmental degradation, ecocidal industrial practice, and rampant unsustainable consumerism. It's easy to argue, in turn, that capitalism also has its own form of destructive extremism: this can be observed in how the social impetus today is no longer about the 'greater social good' but about exploiting the basis of society as much as possible on behalf of profit. As evidenced in recent waves of neoliberal policy, for example, which I consider to be the sort of extremist policy that capitalism is inclined to foster and promote historically: we have witnessed drastic cuts in social welfare, the brutal and oppressive conditions of forced austerity, cuts in pay, a decline in the quality of education and social services, as well as an increase in poverty and unemployment (coinciding with diminishing social opportunity).

It is a tragedy, however, that in spite of the needless social suffering and increasing inequality and exploitation, the standard response on most any city street is that 'there's no better alternative' or 'why should we give up what capitalism continues to provide us, which is historically above and beyond any other system'. While I take the latter to mean more particularly, 'what other system can ensure social-historical progress and the advancement of humanity?' we can expand on this question by adding: 'what other system can ensure social-historical progress and the advancement of humanity in a more socially just and environmentally sustainable manner?'

Bracketing a more wholesome critique of communism, which I've offered in several other places, I partly blame the communist and socialist movements of old for failing to offer any real, concrete alternative voice and leaving the individual to face a world largely exhausted of hope. With that said the injustices and civic erosion that we witness in contemporary capitalist society demand that we no longer remain complacent or in a state of malaise as a result of the failings of the 'left'. We mustn't remain complacent in our social-collective pursuit of 'progress', 'peace', 'justice' and 'equality' in the same way that we must establish an alternative politics and refuse

to accept not only traditional political forms but also old forms of injustice, barbarity, domination and inequality.

In the midst of increasing suffering and barbarity, systemic environmental degradation, erosion of civil liberties, complacency cannot be justified when it comes to the fact that we ought to work toward transcending contemporary capitalism and improve our basic social, natural and collective conditions. But how can we formulate an alternative model that moves beyond traditional political frameworks and their indescribable failings of old? How can we formulate an alternative, foundational philosophy and alternative vision of life? How can we approach the idea of societal change whilst also preserving one of the single, longest standing pursuits in the entire history of humanity: the idea of social progress and of creating a better future for all.

I've discussed these questions in length in a number of past papers. In this work, I should like to emphasis firstly that social change shouldn't be perceived as 'regression' or as a 'negative'. It should be a source of opportunity, creation and development. In truth, there is nothing stopping us from continuing our pursuit of collective social (historical) 'progress', which in the 21st Century means working toward an alternative to capitalism that will offer even more people a right to comfortable living conditions, to more sustainable medical and scientific advancement, to banishing ecocidal industry and environmental and social exploitation, to freer conditions that support more creativity and less the ideology of copyright and private property, and to transcending conditions of power and what Walter Benjamin would describe as 'law preserving violence'.

If ever there is evidence of ideology today, it is precisely in the arguments, in the mechanisms that human beings employ to dogmatically and blindly defend capitalism (or previous failed political models) and remain closed to the fact that we can still do better, that we can still create more environmentally friendly and economically/socially just conditions (which should be one of our normative, historical aims as a society to begin with).

For me – as I have made known in several previous work in and around a critique of communism and the Western political structure as a whole – I have no faith in the communist movement as historically conceived in the same way that I have no faith in capitalism or socialism as a source of potential future alternatives. What's demanded of us today is to learn from all we know and come up with new ideas that withstand the test of critical theory.

With that said, what I do believe in – and herein lies a central principle of the type of critical theory that I advocate – is a foundational, integrative, multidimensional theory of social change and 'progress' that works toward the increasing commonising of society and the idea of non-hierarchical, non-dominant forms of alternative social organisation and practice, spanning not only the economic spheres of life but also the educational, social, relational (anthropological), epistemic, psychological, emotional, communal and so on. I see this alternative philosophy of social change as being rooted in a fundamental theory of 'recognition' (Gunn, Wilding 2013), which implies a many-sided human transformation (i.e., an alternative epistemology, anthropology and cosmology) and shift from subject-object relations to more intimate, experientially mediating subject-subject relations.

In addition – and to keep to a philosophical level of discussion for a moment – I argue that while keeping rooted in a theory of a non-dominant, horizontal and mutually recognitive politics, we must work toward an alternative vision of life and society that matches the prefigurative status of our alternative political horizon by looking at the process of societal change not as the product of traditional forms of revolution (à la the French Revolution) but through a radical, alternative account of revolutionary practice as rooted in a theory of sustainable, grassroots, participatory, transitory (historical) change.

In other words, the old and unsustainable view of ‘revolution’ should be discarded. Instead, we must increasingly come to understand a holistic, integrative and transitory perspective, one which sees the commonising of society as a goal – or as Chomsky would say a ‘proposal’ that requires constant ‘advocacy’ in the form of taking concrete, viable steps simultaneously on a grassroots and policy level. Each step would be another movement forward in the transition to an alternative society, to reconceptualising the modern political-economy.

To close this chapter, there is truth to the observation that when money ceases to become the mediator, when money ceases to be the means through which human beings deal with one another, people have historically become instruments of other people in the most barbarous and indescribable of ways (historically speaking). But this doesn’t mean that we are forever limited to the horizon of capitalism. As Richard Gunn, Adrian Wilding and I have written in numerous papers (individually and collectively), Occupy-styled events evidence a dynamic where ‘mutual recognition’ obtains, suggesting an alternative, social-collective horizon is possible (however fragile).

For all of his short comings, Zizek is right to suggest in a very general manner that we aren’t limited to the choice between direct and indirect relations of domination and exploitation. He is also right to suggest, in a similar fashion as the Frankfurt School before him, that any idea of an alternative to the capitalist horizon is seen today as being ‘utopian’. But it is fundamentally misguided to see every suggestion of an alternative vision of life outside direct and in-direct forms of domination as ‘utopian’. Indeed, the role of critical theory in the 21st Century is to normatively scrutinise all attempts at false reconciliation and to be suspicious of any talk of future utopian society as a final historical end. But this doesn’t imply that the idea of a better future, of a more just society, is mere dream or poetry.

While these comments have a very general character at the outset, I argue that in the context of my previous research coupled with a range of studies and research presently being developed at Heathwood, the theoretical approach proposed both here and elsewhere suggests how more detailed questions may be answered not only with regards to potential alternatives on a micro and macro level, but also how we might start moving forward more generally in theory and practice.

II. Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics: Complimentary systems in the transitory, historical process of societal change?

Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics are widely considered as two of the best possible alternatives presently available to us. While Parecon is superior to Economic

Democracy “on the problems of division of labor, managing externalities, and social relations” (Weiss, 2013), the larger issue that we must confront when considering either system is whether markets are necessary for economic allocation and ensuring economic freedom (Ibid), which, to my mind, also concerns basic issues regarding the relation between freedom, labour and society. There are multiple perspectives and criticisms regarding both pro-market positions (which exist outside of capitalism as traditionally defined) and anti-market perspectives (the strongest of which being Parecon).

The purpose of this paper is not to provide definitive answer to the above issues – I will reserve such a discussion for a following study. In the meantime, my aim here is to raise serious critical theoretical questions about whether markets should be retained in a just economy and whether Parecon, which remains in its infancy, would benefit from Economic Democracy as part of a transitional process from a more progressive market-economy to a potential transcendence of markets altogether.

The basic issue I have with both Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics is that they exist primarily as economic theories of an alternative to capitalism. While this is understandable given their primary field of study, the problem is that they can both be very one-dimensional in their account of what an alternative to capitalism might look like, because they both tend to see things purely in economic terms.

Economic Democracy is perhaps less susceptible to this criticism, because while Parecon primarily sees people as producers and consumers, Economic Democracy stresses in its formulations the importance of seeing people as citizens in the first instance. For this reason, I would say that Economic Democracy considers in more depth than Parecon the emotional, relational and psychological dimensions of a possible alternative political-economy.

Regardless, both of these theories need to be integrated into a far more holistic, multidimensional critique of capitalism and formulation/development of a potential alternative. Not only does this require more of an interdisciplinary approach, spanning all areas of social, economic, political, relation, psychological life, but also a foundational alternative philosophy.

In addition, while the question of which system is most desirable is very important today, I do not believe that we can determine this question in purely economic terms. A great deal of experiment is admittedly required to fully understand the consequences of both economic systems in praxis. These consequences should be weighed up against and considered from the perspective of a broad, independent, interdisciplinary analysis.

Both systems also need to be subject to a number of tests and deep scrutiny on a critical theoretical level to really get a sense of how they stand up to the practical, philosophical and political demands of the 21st Century. For example, we must ask ourselves: would either Economic Democracy or Participatory Economics assist in the promotion of non-dominant, anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical social relations? Would either system affirm a fundamental shift from ‘contradictory recognition’ (i.e., one-way circuits of power) to ‘mutual recognition’ (i.e., subject-subject relations)? Would either system promote a free-flourishing subject, who no longer needs to live in fear of dying under the weight of an indifferent economic system

(Sherman, 2007)? Would either system provide openness to a world to which the individual can actually afford to be open (Ibid)? In other words, would Economic Democracy or Participatory Economics function as an extension of the liberated subject? These are but a few of a list of basic questions that need asking and further consideration.

What is also important for us to enquire about is the issue that Adam Weiss points to in conclusion to his paper on a comparative critique of Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics: namely, how viable a transition from capitalism to either system really is (Ibid)? On my account, it appears for a number of reasons that Economic Democracy (coupled perhaps with certain supporting aspects of a peer-to-peer Collaborative Economy, basic theories regarding workers co-ops, and different policies like the basic income law) is perhaps the most easy to integrate/implement in the modern political-economic context. In a follow paper, perhaps I will elaborate further as to why I think this is the case. In meantime, I argue that in order for the transition to a Participatory Economy to be successful a broad range of adjustments will have to be made not only economically but across the entire spectrum of society. Without the right foundations – and I mean ‘foundations’ in the utmost fundamental sense of the word – I think it would be difficult and perhaps even naive of us to consider directly or immediately implementing a non-market system like Parecon. There would need to be so many different social support networks, so many different social and communal organisations and centres, so many multi-sided transformations regarding the basics in terms of how we relate with each other, ourselves and the world, as well as a number transitional groups established and operating for this to happen successfully. These networks are something that capitalism inherently resists, as it does with the establishing of most any form of truly alternative public space. That is why I think we need to look at things more transitionally.

Economic Democracy, to my mind, would be reformist in nature, but it shouldn't necessarily be seen as an end in-itself. Rather, we should take a broader perspective, a longer vision, and see Economic Democracy as a historical step in the direction toward a non-market style system like Parecon.

III. Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics: A question of implementation

While David Schweickart proposes the idea of a leftist political party that would hypothetically enact reforms to bring about Economic Democracy, I would prefer to see reforms on state-level driven and supported not by a centralised leftist party with a traditional dominant leader and hierarchical structure. Rather, these reforms should be driven in the same way that Occupy is trying to promote and support and drive them now: that is, through consensus-based, mutually recognitive democratic movements empowered on a grassroots level.

Taking it one step further, I would be inclined to support a more horizontal political approach that works already from within the context of an alternative political horizon. Taking from what Occupy does extremely well, a consensus-based approach on both local and state levels, coupled with the type of state reforms proposed by Economic Democratic theory, would represent a healthy step toward rearranging society for the benefit of not only a more just political-economy now but also potentially an even more just political-economy in the future. In this regard, I agree

with Michael Albert, one of the fathers of Parecon, that an emphasis on social movements and Occupy-styled politics as the principal agents of transition is not only necessary but vital.

With that said, I should stress that I do not perceive Economic Democracy to be any sort of final solution. On the contrary, my approach is more considerate and wants to do away the sort of black and white thinking endemic in contemporary society. I perceive Economic Democracy as one step in the process of a greater social-historical transition to a more just and reconciled political-economy. What I mean by this, moreover, is that I am inclined to argue that Economic Democracy is a first step toward being able to implement more constructive experiments with a Participatory Economy. To my mind, Economic Democracy provides much more a supportive foundation not only for further future experimenting with Parecon on the level of praxis, but also for a possible future transition to a non-market style economy as a whole.

This approach would also coincide with different critical theoretical understandings and analysis, particularly in terms of a theory of social progress and the development of an alternative to capitalism as being normative and unfolding – a constant work in progress – given of course the right political-economic conditions.

I also advocate this approach because, as it presently stands, Participatory Economics remains incomplete and in need of much more development. As I have written in other places, there is great potential for a Participatory Economy. However, Parecon remains in its infancy and while I agree with Noam Chomsky that Participatory Economics is one of the best alternatives available to us in the long run, it still has a lot of shortcomings and leaves a lot of fundamental questions unanswered. While Economic Democracy could provide certain specific mechanisms and processes beneficial to a possible future transition to a Participatory Economy, it would in the very least open a lot more space on a grassroots level for people to experiment with Parecon in a broad range of workplaces and spheres of social life, potentially assisting in its broader development as a viable, concrete alternative to market-style economies. (This approach could be further expanded to include a theory of ‘full communism’, as therefore a potential product of the historical transition from Participatory Economics).

With that said, it is important to emphasise here that there is enough in the Participatory Economic model to potentially work with and perhaps expand or advance so as to integrate with a more multidimensional (interdisciplinary) critical theory of society and a fundamentally radical, holistic view of a ‘systemic alternative’ – one which has enough theoretical and practical resourcefulness to reconceptulise the political-economy on account of not only the economic aspects of life but also the social, psychological, emotional, relational, epistemic, existential, etc.

As I wrote in a recent series of essay on an alternative philosophy of systemic change:

“The old idea of the revolution as an event is absurd. How could the entire re-creation of the world be carried by anything shorter than century?”[13] The answer is that we need to develop a new understanding of systemic change. For this reason, I often describe social or systemic change as being a many-sided transformation that is historically transitory. In other words, fundamental social change is not just a political or economic event subject to a flash in the pan revolution. Systemic change, I argue, should be seen as integral and multidimensional: it’s

economic and political inasmuch as it is psychological, emotional, existential, relational, anthropological, epistemic, and so on. In other words, it challenges not only the systems and structures of the present political-economy, but the epistemology that operates in-behind the system of capital, the way in which we educate our children, the manner in which we interact with the ourselves and each other, the prominent forms of authoritarian parenting techniques, and the basic social and psychic paradigms we've established.

Taking this transitional, multidimensional and integrative view coupled with a fundamental theory of an alternative political and social horizon rooted in a 'mutually recognitive politics' and its implied shift toward an alternative anthropology, epistemology and cosmology, I feel that we would be able to sustain a much more foundational and interdisciplinary approach when it comes to the idea of 'systemic change'. (Hypothetically, this would represent an extended view of Occupy's alternative politics).

It may seem at first glance that Economic Democracy and Participatory Economics share too many differences to be considered together as possible transitional partners (the greatest difference being that economic democracy proposes a market system, while participatory economics wants to transcend market altogether). But the idea that one system could potentially lead into the other (as part of a greater transitory process) is something I don't see as being too far-fetched, and would provide Western democracies an opportunity to break from their frequent short-sightedness on behalf of a deeper vision of the future.

Of course when considering this approach different challenges arise and a new questions need answering. In a following paper I will lay out this proposed vision in greater detail and attempt to answer more detailed questions. For the time being, I would like to turn my attention to the idea of the Basic Income Law, a policy I see as being very important to the possible transition from Capitalism to Economic Democracy to Participatory Economics.

III. The basic income law

Elliot Sperber's recent paper '[*Toward a Salutary Political-Economy – Freedom from Jobs*](#)' has received some interesting comments, questioning the basic income law and its practical consequences. In this paper Elliot wonderfully argues that freedom is not dependent on jobs, and what we should really be arguing toward is a 'freedom from jobs'. I interpret this argument as meaning that we must free ourselves from the burden of 'jobs' as presently conceived in contemporary capitalist society. In other words, we should be working toward not creating more jobs within the context of the modern political-economy, but rather toward a reconceptualisation of the modern political-economy that frees people from the contemporary definition of 'jobs' as principled on the division/exploitation of human labour. In turn, I read Elliot's argument as an affirmation of the need to transcend the idea of 'jobs' as based on the capitalist mode of relations on behalf of a socially constructed alternative that frees human labour from coercion and domination.

In relation to the basic income law, I would argue that one of the most important reasons why we should look to the possible implementation of the basic income law is that it would free a lot of people from having to work meaningless, part-time jobs in often very destructive and highly-

exploitative industries (consider fast-food work, for example). If the basic income law were, for instance, set at £15,000 per annum, it would mostly affect what is presently classified as ‘low income earners’, helping to alleviate financial pressure and the burden of the oppressive and coercive cycle of highly exploited (often minimum wage) labour (commonly associated with retail and fast-food and so on).

Furthermore, I see the basic income law as being vital when it comes to potentially implementing Economic Democracy (in the greater transitional process toward a non-market style economy). It would not only free people from their dependency on highly exploitative capitalist labour cycles, particularly in industries that depend on low-wage labour, philosophically speaking it would also provide necessary economic space for the individual to rediscover the meaning of a ‘free’ society.

On an economic level, moreover, I see the basic income law as an important step transitionally toward what Adorno once theorised as the free individual: i.e., the subject no longer objectified into character to satisfy one’s basic needs within the coercive economic conditions that capitalism creates. One of my favourite passages that expands on Adorno’s view in this regard is by David Sherman, who writes in *Dialectics of Subjectivity* (2007):

We should see that while the free individual (in the free society) would not be “guarding the old particularity”, there would still be an “old particularity” or “subject objectified into a character” to be continuously worked through. The individual would be a work of art ceaselessly in progress. And, indeed, it is each individual constantly reworking his self (and, impliedly, the collective of which he is a part), that is the essence of the notion of a mediating subject. In contrast, what impels the individual to hypostatize the “old particularity” in its presently existing form – that is, to undertake the “bad faith” project of making himself into a thing – is the fear that by not making himself into a thing .../ he will die under the weight of an indifferent economic system (Sherman, 2007).

While Economic Democracy, supported by the implementation of the basic income law would by no means represent ‘free society’ or the final, ideal state of affairs as witnessed by the free individual, it would provide in the first instance more sympathetic political-economic conditions, which would support the alleviation of such a fear, allowing the individual to feel more free to open him or herself up to the world. “And, by opening himself up to the world, which would mean that self-identity would become more fluid (and conditions less authoritarian, coercive and exploitative), the individual would be in a position, as Nietzsche states, to become who he is” (Ibid; parenthesis mine)

As Elliot points out, the basic income law would still presuppose a market-style economy and should not be considered as any sort of final solution. Rather the basic income law is but one policy in a network of coinciding policies, which should be seen as transitional in nature. Its purpose is, in other words, to support a sustainable and historically transitory theory of social change (for more on this alternative theory of social change, please see several of my past papers) alleviating the horribly oppressive conditions that are the result of economic coercion in capitalist societies.

Practically speaking, if the basic income law was to be implemented within the context of Economic Democracy (it should be noted that the law is presently being debated in Switzerland in the context of the modern political-economy) it would represent a step in the transitory process toward a non-market style economy, because it would provide enough space for the individual to reconceptualise the meaning of his or her labour and would support Economic Democracy in eliminating highly exploitative industries (which operate, almost entirely, on cheap labour).

In response to criticism of this law, particularly around the idea of ‘freeing people from jobs’: it is wrong to conflate the concept of the basic income law and freeing people from the oppressive cycle of capitalist labour with ‘simply giving money to people for nothing’. This ideological perception, which very much originates from a capitalist view of the world, only sees State funds being provided to people to sit on their arse. The common myth here, however, is almost a mirror of the fundamentally false presupposition that we can either have direct or in-direct forms of domination: i.e., that people need to be coerced in order to ‘work’ or contribute toward society.

It’s true that the purpose of the basic income law doesn’t fit within the ideological coordinates of capitalist society. It doesn’t fit within the contemporary, neoliberal view of the world. In fact, it is completely incongruous with contemporary capitalist society because, in essence, the basic income law is social-based and not capital-based. Its purpose is to support or assist in fostering more healthy social conditions, wherein people are allowed the democratic right to have power over their labour and choose in what way they want to contribute to society. It allows the person forced to quit school and undertake two part-time jobs flipping hamburgers and selling mass consumer goods to free themselves from this oppressive cycle and its psychological/emotional weight in order to pursue life/existential/labour interests that happen to be meaningful to them. Freeing people from having to get a meaningless job just to scrape by enough money to barely ‘survive’ (if that), the basic income law would support a more socially-geared political-economy, especially if integrated within the context of Economic Democracy.

Within the capitalist horizon, the problem is that the basic income law gets quickly reduced to the reactionary and simplistic assertions of ‘people not working while earning’. But this ideological account is based on a falsified concept of what it means to offer one’s labour in support of the advancement of society in the first place.

As a recent commenter reacted in response to the Elliot’s paper:

“So the idea is not to work but to get income? ... I remember when the Soviet Union fell it was because there was no toilet paper to buy. If nobody works who would make the basic things we need. Utopia is what you are talking about here and because of human frailties and imperfections that will not happen on earth. Whether you know it or not there were the 1% in communist Russia. There will always be a 1% wherever you go on earth. It is human nature the same that you try to dismiss. If we distributed all the wealth in the world equally right now, how long before there will be the 1% again? I say 150 years as my guess, but do this mental exercise and you can see that to stay true to the cause the cause must be reasonable. Let’s stay focused on crony capitalist, corrupt labor unions, and bankrupt politicians. P.S. Get to work.”

The idea that Elliot presents in his paper that we could transcend ‘jobs’ as presently conceived – this does not necessarily mean people don’t work. Again, this is a rather archaic distinction just as is the position that we will always have social hierarchies (i.e., the ‘1%’ will always govern the majority). Such assertions are the product of a (false) universalisation: i.e., a perception of human nature that is largely conditioned within the context of ‘(bad) society’, which is more often than not defined in the context of the history of capitalism and genesis of ‘bourgeois subjectivity.

The common misconception here, moreover, is rooted in an ideological view of society and of history. While the basic income law would help free people from horrible jobs, oppressive labour cycles, and unhealthy working conditions – to be free from “jobs” doesn’t mean to be free from work, from creation, from one’s own existential projects, from partaking in social enterprise, and contributing toward society.

It often seems that what people criticise about the basic income law is actually criticism of the modern political-economy. Let us consider the following comment for example:

“I just work to gain financial security so I can do the things I want to (and not have to work once I’ve accumulated enough claim checks). I’m reasonably sure that many Black Diamond employees (one of the makers of rock climbing gear I use to safely climb said rocks) would likely feel the same way. Those assumptions established, how is it that my needs, or Black Diamond’s needs, will be met? If I’ve no need to work, others will go without my skills in computer networking. If Black Diamond employees have no need to work, I will go without their engineering and manufacturing skills, resulting in me not having access to their goods that I rely on for my primary hobby.”

The question here is a perfect example of my point around how animosity toward the basic income law has not so much to do with the basic income law itself, but with what might an alternative political-economy look like. I claim, moreover, that the question actually being encircled here cannot be answered by the basic income law itself, because that’s not the purpose of said law. In order to answer the above question, we would need to look to alternative economic systems presently being formulated, such as Worker Self-Directed Enterprises (WSDE’s), Economic Democracy, Participatory Economics, and so on.

In an Economic Democracy or Participatory Economic system, one would still hypothetically have “Black Diamond” as a company, wherein people interested in rock climbing come together to produce rock climbing gear as a democratic (i.e., non-hierarchical, non-dominant, etc.) workers co-op. People interested in making honey or video games or tools or windows or medical equipment or whatever would likely do the same. The difference is that the motivation is no longer for profit, but typically for social advancement and enterprise. While Economic Democracy would still be orientated toward profit, on my own formulations it would not be driven toward ‘excess profit’. Rather it would be driven on the basis of social enterprise, which happens to utilise a limited concept of ‘profit’ to maintain its market-system.

If we allowed ourselves to be idealists for just a moment, one could argue that an alternative society principled around a freedom from jobs would be even more creative, more open to

creation and social enterprise and socially meaningful work – and all within a non-coercive, non-dominant social context. There are lots of examples – even today in the midst of an extremely alienated social world – of people carving out alternative spaces and labour-practices that evidence the basics for an alternative political-economy that’s creative, inspiring and more humane than ever before. These alternatives range from agricultural communities to alternative education facilities, arts councils or groups, and political networks, many of which I’ve discussed in the past or intend to in the future.

To claim, as the above commenter posits, that ‘many things aren’t readily accomplished without the use of bureaucracy’ is, to be blunt, a false assertion. We can say it is false when so much evidence points to the contrary. In my own studies on alternatives, which I write about frequently, I have seen nothing that honestly justifies this claim in the same way that I’ve observed nothing that honestly justifies the need for social coercion and hierarchy.

Further, one’s passion for rock climbing doesn’t need to be seen as a “luxury” – as though such activities and interests are limited purely to one’s ‘leisure time’ as presently designated in contemporary capitalism. To move beyond capitalism doesn’t mean to move back to the Stone Age or to simply live for basic necessities –this would defeat the notion of ‘social historical progress’ that, in truth, *motivates and inspires the most basic critique of the system of capital and formulation of alternatives*. I’d like to think that in an alternative economic circumstance people would get to pursue, advance and contribute to their interests more than they do now.

This leads me to my final point of discussion.

V. ‘Social progress’ is not limited to the horizon of capitalism

I think the biggest mistake – and it is quite a common one – is to think of social-historical progress (i.e., certain technological advancements, medicine, transportation, etc.) as being necessarily limited to the horizon of capitalism. To argue toward an alternative political-economy doesn’t mean a return to agrarian society. I would argue that the point is actually to ensure ‘social progress continues’ as a historical aim, because in more ways than one we’re presently losing sight of what ‘social progress’ really means on behalf of commodity fetishism, the ideology of profit, the exploitation/division of labour, and so on.

As Michael Ott wonderfully illustrates in his recent paper [*Something’s Missing: A Study of the Dialectic of Utopia in the theories of Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch*](#)(2013):

According to Marx’s [2002:171-182] materialist dialectical critique, religion is the fantastic mystifying product and “spiritual aroma” of this horrifying pre-human history of class domination. When this history is finally negated through the conscious, revolutionary creation of a classless, non-alienated, and reconciled future society, both religion and the State as systems of domination will “wither away.” Yet, within this history, religion nevertheless plays an ambiguous role. On the one hand, as expressed particularly in the history of Christianity, religion functions as socio-cultural ideology that produces a false consciousness of reality in humanity. As such, it gives an “aura” of religious legitimation to the reified economic and political relations of social production

and its class antagonisms. This is religion of and for the victors of history's class war. This is religion as "an inverted consciousness of the world" that blesses the dehumanizing global system of class domination by the few – the "winners" – that produces the resulting suffering and horror of the many – the "losers" – to continue. In this barbarically "inverted" society and history, this is positivistically called "progress" [Benjamin 1968:253-264]. As a social action system given the function of producing equilibrium and maintenance within a society and history of class domination, religion thus becomes the illusory happiness of people that thereby allows if not demands that people avoid taking responsibility for "pulling the emergency brake" on this "progressive" train ride through hell for the revolutionary purpose of creating a more humane, reconciled and shalom-filled future society. As Marx [2002:179; Adorno 1973, 1974; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Benjamin 1968:253-264; 1999:456-488] states, it is not this radical revolution for universal human emancipation that is a utopic dream, but rather it is the patch-work reform efforts of partial socio-political changes that allow the structures and system of inequity, suffering, horror and death to stay in place that is the ideological covering of dystopia (Ott, 2013).

Ott goes on to write later on in the same paper (I quote in full):

According to Adorno, by the realization of these particular dreams, their very best element – their future-oriented, utopian dynamic/spirit/purpose – is increasingly endangered of being forgotten and thus, lost. This very real fear, of course, is grounded in the reality of the capitalist culture of consumption that systemically and ideologically reduces humanity's utopian longing into a commodity fetishism that prioritizes "having" over "being" [Siebert, et al. 2013; Fromm 1976]. These realized utopian dreams have become nothing more than tiresome, positivistic facts produced by the success of modern science and technology. As such, these realized wishes become ideologically deceptive – producing a "false consciousness" – with regards to any utopian longing. The fulfillment of the wish takes something away from the future-oriented, "erotic" utopian vision and dynamic from which the wish began [Bloch 1988:1]. Such realized longings are emptied of their utopian dynamic of the hope for that which is other than what is. Civil society's technological success in fulfilling a specific utopian wish reduces the critical substance and dynamic of utopian thought into being little more than a scientific/technological justification of bourgeois historicism's concept of "progress." Utopia and its hoped-for future strategically become absorbed into the static status quo, the eternal positivistic now, which transposes the dynamic, future oriented, hope-inspiring utopic dynamic of the "not-yet" into the progressive expectation for the given economic productive forces to provide consumers – today called "customers" not citizens – with the ever-new realization of such commodified dreams. This abstract, chronological notion of "progress" on a historical continuum into an empty and meaningless future quantitatively replaces the qualitative, utopic theory and praxis for a new, more humane, reconciled future society. This loss of the dream, longing and hope for that which is "other" than what is the case is a consequence of the success of an instrumental rationality and logic made socially concrete by modern technology and a mass culture that lauds its ability to realize these specific utopian wishes (Ott, 2013).

In closing, recent debate around the possible future implementation of the basic income law not only reveals deeper problems when it comes to how we perceive ourselves, our labour, and the meaning of society on a greater philosophical level, particularly along the lines of bourgeois historicism's concept of "progress" (Ibid). It also highlights this perverse idea that we have – perhaps as a result of the historical failings of Soviet Communism – that if people are not forced or coerced to work then nothing will ever get done. But this is what I would call an ideological distinction. It's ideological in the sense that this perception is conditioned on the basis of capitalist economics (and henceforth social relations) and its (false) universalisation of 'human nature', which sees people as being inherently lazy or in need of coercion to be socially productive.

On the contrary, people need opportunity, equality, and freedom to be truly productive. In capitalist society, 'production' is usually anything but actual human productivity – if we consider human productivity as a natural extension of genuine, free human creativity and labour.

If social productivity in the truest sense of the word is an extension of human creativity, productivity in capitalism is anything but 'productive'. Of course things are produced within capitalist economies, but they're produced in the same coercive and dominating context that saw African slaves produce American cotton. The only difference is that instead of being directly dominated, young African Americans are being paid a few dollars, which while not enough to survive on is ideologically justified as an 'ethical solution' to the 'great social conundrum'.

Let me put it bluntly: underlying the capitalist worldview is a fundamental mistrust of not only human beings but also of 'freedom' in the purest sense. The misreading of history, society and 'what it means to be human' evident in different criticisms of the basic income law is not only highly questionable but it also attests to what Paulo Freire identified in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). To paraphrase Freire and with a slight play on words: Society either functions as an instrument, which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

In truth, one should not feel coerced or pressured to work a job that they hate, feel that they must perform a task they don't agree with in order to 'earn a living', or support destructive industries because it's the only low-wage opportunity available to them. To think that we comply with such a horrendous economic and political reality is insane!

This brings me back to what Adorno once observed as one of the deeper problems modern society: the (bourgeois) universalisation of contemporary social ailment, which essentially takes social injustice, inequality, oppression that is a product of coercive society (or 'bad society') and universalises it as a law of nature, claiming that the fundamental systems in which contemporary society depends is thus unalterable. Not only does this displace the source of one's economic and social despair and blames some ungrounded, abstract law of human nature; but it entirely fails to see the source of that despair and the systemic context of social injustice, inequality and violence in both modern and historic societies.

It is just this type of ‘hardening effect’ that Adorno was so right to highlight in his critique. It is not idealist to argue toward the awareness of the horrible effects that ‘coercive social conditions have on people’ and to suggest that we ought to work toward implementing alternatives, toward understanding a foundational critique of modern and historic society, violence, domination, inequality (etc.).

On the other hand, what is precisely mythical about today’s thinking is how: instead of identifying socio-historical forces of systemic domination, one displaces the crisis of capitalism, a critique of the fundamental regularities found within the historic genesis of ‘coercive society’ and employs a positivist ideology that blames (abstract notions of) unalterable laws (i.e., what is “mythical in both myth and enlightenment is the thought that fundamental change is impossible ../ Such resistance to change characterizes both ancient myths of fate and modern devotion to the facts” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002).

It may be that we’re all left today to hope in the midst of hopelessness, but, as Adorno would say, “in the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable.” It is just the opposite of the hardened, apathetic and apolitical attitude commonly found today that is needed, so that we may collectively expose the systemic context of needless social suffering, domination, coercion, oppression, inequality – i.e., determinate negation – and contemplate, in the words of Adorno, the redemption of life from the basis of the negative – “not as dystopia but as the living, historical theory and praxis of determinately negating that which causes the suffering and destruction of humanity and nature” (Ott, 2013).

As always, the choice around the possibility of organising and developing a better future is ours to make or to evade.