

A faint, light gray background illustration of a large crowd of people. Many of the figures are holding up rectangular signs or placards, suggesting a public demonstration or a community meeting. The figures are stylized and lack facial features, focusing on their collective action.

a participatory society or libertarian communism?

a debate between the Project for a Participatory
Society and the libcom.org group

Introduction

In late 2008 the libcom.org group were approached by the UKWatch.net website to take part in a debate with the Project for a Participatory Society (PPS), themed around 'anti-capitalist vision.' This seemed like a good opportunity to get our own ideas down in writing, as well as to subject them to the test of robust criticism. We also had criticisms of our own of 'participatory economics' ('parecon') which again we had discussed but not written down anywhere, and this debate would give us the chance to put them to a parecon advocate. The debates were to be published on UKWatch and their US sister-site ZNet.

For libcom.org, Joseph Kay was the main participant, while for the PPS Mark Evans took on that role. To kick off the debate, we were both asked to set out our own 'visions for the UK economy', which we would then respond to, and respond to responses in turn. The debate began with a flurry of exchanges, but from January 2009 we'd had no reply to our latest submissions. UKWatch were busy with a site upgrade, but despite exchanging emails over the intervening period by August 2009 we'd still received no responses and UKWatch.net had gone offline.

Consequently, we publish the debate as it stands here as we think it contains much of interest to anti-capitalist activists. As our replies were the last ones we are aware of, we do have the last word. However we are sure this doesn't preclude further debate, using this pamphlet as a point of departure.

The Project for a Participatory Society is a network of people based in the UK committed to progressive social change. PPS see war, poverty, climate change and many other problems in the world today as unsurprising consequences of particular forms of social organisation. They see the erosion of civil liberties, the abuses of human rights, the increase in inequality and other injustices as resulting from the core values and internal organisation of dominant institutions within society. Mark Evans lives in Birmingham and works as an NHS healthcare assistant. He is an active trade unionist. www.ppsuk.org.uk

The libcom.org group is a small collective of libertarian communists based in and around London. They maintain libcom.org, a resource for radical workers a resource for all wish to fight to improve their lives, their communities and their working conditions. The site takes its name from an abbreviation of "libertarian communism" - and its goals of liberty and community - the political current they identify with. Joseph Kay is a financial services worker from Brighton. He is a member of the Solidarity Federation. www.libcom.org

libcom.org's vision

The current open financial crisis makes clear several economic truths that are more easily overlooked during 'business as usual.' Firstly, that there's no such thing as a national economy anymore, if there ever truly was. The same forces are at work everywhere, as the 'credit crunch' bites across the globe. For the purposes of this discussion we will focus on the specifics of the UK, but it must be borne in mind that our 'vision' is necessarily internationalist and global.

Secondly, the economy does not exist to serve our needs, but instead our needs are shaped to serve the economy's. We are all expected to make whatever sacrifices are required to help the economy – so we face 'wage restraint', environmental damage, cuts to healthcare etc... because the economy 'demands' it.

Thirdly, it is clear that there is a real class divide, an 'us and them'. While everyone is a slave to the economy, this is experienced differently depending on our position in society. Thus while bosses and politicians experience the demands of the economy directly - under the guise of 'market forces' guiding their investment, redundancy or policy decisions – working people experience this lack of control over our lives through the daily activity of working for a boss.

These points are inter-related. The economy is based on a very simple process – money is invested to generate more money. Bosses call it profit, politicians economic growth. When money functions like this, it functions as capital. As capital increases (or the economy expands), this is called capital accumulation, and it's the driving force of the economy.

This simple imperative has far-reaching consequences, and doesn't just apply to for-profit private companies, but to economic activity per se (thus over the last year we have seen continuous attacks on the real wages and conditions of public sector workers in the UK). Those accumulating capital do so better when they can shift the costs onto others, so we see the proliferation of ecological and social 'externalities.' Thus catastrophic climate change and widespread poverty are signs of the normal functioning of the system. Furthermore, for money to make more money, more and more things have to be exchangeable for money. Thus the tendency is for everything from everyday items to DNA sequences to carbon dioxide emissions – and crucially, our own activity; our ability to work - to become commodified.

And it is this last point - the commodification of our creative-productive capacities - which holds the secret to capital accumulation. Money does not turn into more money by magic; capitalists are not alchemists! Rather in a commodified world we all need something to sell in order to buy the things we need. Those of us with nothing to sell

except our capacity to work have to sell this capacity to those who own the things we need to work; factories, offices, etc. But therefore the commodities we produce at work are not ours, they belong to our employers. Furthermore, we produce far more commodities and products as workers than the necessary products to maintain us as workers, due to long hours, productivity improvements etc. This difference between the wages we are paid and the value we create is how capital is accumulated.

What this tells us is that capital is not just a thing, or even a process, but a social relation between classes. Now when we say class, we are not talking about a system of classifying individuals – who may after all fit somewhere in between these categories, having a waged job and running a small business in their spare time say. Rather the function of a class analysis is to understand the tensions within capitalist society, the fault lines along which it may rupture. Since the economy does not exist to serve our needs, it is necessary for us to assert them ourselves, collectively. Since the bosses and politicians are all but powerless in the face of ‘market forces,’ each needing to act in a way conducive to continued accumulation (and in any case they do quite well out of this impotence!), they cannot act in the interests of workers, since any concessions they grant will aid their competitors on a national or international level. Thus the struggle between our needs and the needs of the economy takes the form of a struggle between classes.

Therefore, our vision for the UK economy under capitalism is for us, as a class, to impose our needs over the needs of capital. In concrete terms in the UK today, this mostly involves defensive struggles over wages, conditions and the ‘social wage’ we all receive in the form of public services, notably the NHS. In particular one struggle which has been prominent and in which we have been involved has been over sub-inflation pay offers (i.e. pay cuts). There have been a wave of strikes over this issue, but so far workers, divided along union lines have been largely defeated by the combined efforts of the employers, the government and the unions, who have to varying degrees demoralised workers, witch-hunted militants, ignored strike votes and cut backroom deals.

However the story is not entirely negative, the struggles over sub-inflation pay continue, and are set to escalate as the economy stalls and prices of essentials continue to rise. There have also been (so far) isolated victories, such as Shell truckers winning a 7% pay rise (9% this year, 5% next, against a government pay cap/target of 2%). This small victory was only achieved after the dispute threatened to spread to drivers from other companies. These recent victories and defeats - as well as the long history of workers struggle - suggest those tactics which are most effective: struggles controlled by the participants themselves not union bureaucrats, and for struggles to spread beyond all divisions of workplace, sector, union...

When we say the economy doesn't exist serve our needs and therefore we have to assert them against capital, we beg the question what a society that does exist to meet

its own needs would look like. In other words, where does our vision of asserting our needs lead? Such a society, based on the principle of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' is called libertarian communism. This society is at least implicit whenever workers assert their needs against the needs of capital, and has at times been made explicit as that struggle has exploded into revolutionary events. Historically struggles have only taken on this revolutionary character when they have sought to go beyond all divisions of sector, union, race, gender, geography, national identity etc. The struggle against these divisions is therefore a necessary aspect of class struggle.

Now communism has nothing to do with the former USSR or present-day Cuba or North Korea. These are capitalist societies with only one capitalist – the state (the current spate of bank nationalisations in response to the financial crisis has shown once again there's nothing inherently 'left' about nationalisation!). Communism is a stateless society where our activity – and its products – no longer take the form of things to be bought and sold. Where activity is not done to earn a wage or turn a profit, but to meet human needs. It is also a democratic society, in a way far more profound than what 'democracy' means in its current parliamentary sense.

As there will be no division between owners (state or private) and workers with the means of production held in common, decisions can be made democratically among equals. As production is not for goods to be sold on the market, there are no market forces to pit different groups of workers against each other or compel social and environmental 'externalities.' We will work only as long as we decide is necessary to produce the things we need at an intensity we are happy with, not how long the boss demands of us according to the norms of the labour market. Thus production is socialised under our conscious control, and so the separate spheres of economics (where we produce) and politics (where we are governed) are abolished. There is only a self-managed, self-governing society which exists to meet the self-determined needs of its members. A libertarian communist society.

PPS' response

Hi Joseph, thanks for your opening statement - I think it reads well.

We clearly have a lot in common. However I do have some concerns. I also disagree with some of the things you say and I think that your piece raises some important questions that you do not answer.

After reading your statement I think that I can safely say that we both want to help build a popular movement for radical-progressive social transformation. One of the basic

necessities for the creation of such a movement is a compelling vision of an alternative to capitalism. Our shared vision is our solution to the many personal and social problems that result from the capitalist economic system. Our vision will also help inform our strategy. After all if we don't have a clear idea of what our long-term goal is then our short-term objectives can only be based on what we are against and not on what we are for. This means that our strategy is only informed by what we are anti which in turn gives our campaigns a negative quality. So the initial attraction of our vision will be its ability to solve the very real problems that capitalism systematically inflicts on us all. A secondary benefit is that our vision both informs and therefore adds a positive quality to our strategy. This is why developing vision is so important and it is in the hope that we can come to some agreement over what constitutes good vision that I make the following points.

First of all I would like to say that I agree with your "economic truths". I think that you are right to point out that "our vision is necessarily internationalist". I think that you are also right when you say that "the economy does not exist to serve our needs" and like you I think "it is clear that there is a real class divide" and also that "the function of a class analysis is to understand the tensions within capitalist society". However, I think that there is more to the class system than "us and them" as you put it. I explain what I mean by this below.

But before going on to raise some disagreements I would like to just touch on a slight concern. You say "The struggle against [race, gender, national identity etc] is ... a necessary aspect of class struggle". When you say this I think that you are trying to take into account other forms of exploitation that are not strictly speaking economic in origin. I do like where you are going with this but it does seem that when you ultimately locate these non-economic issues in class struggle that you might be making the mistake of assuming that racial, gender and political groups are less important agents for social change than class. This tendency is referred to as "economism" and advocates of participatory economics are inclined to be quite critical of it because it suggests that economic agents involved in class struggle should have priority over the other groups involved in other forms of struggle. Instead we tend to employ a liberating theory called complimentary holism. According to this theory there are four spheres of social life. They are the kinship sphere, the political sphere, the community sphere and the economic sphere. Each sphere has its own function and all are socially necessary. Not only do we think that the four social spheres are necessary we also take the view that any dominance of one sphere over another should be determined by knowledge that results from rational enquiry into a particular society and should not be based on a dogmatically ideological prediction.

I also find the following statement confusing - "... our vision for the UK economy under capitalism is for us as a class, to impose our needs over the needs of capitals." What do

you mean by “vision ... under capitalism”? When I talk of economic vision I mean vision of a post capitalist economy. You then go on to describe what you mean by vision “In concrete terms” saying this “mostly involves defensive struggles over wages, conditions ...” But this is not a statement on vision (at least as I understand it), rather this is a statement about strategy.

One part of your statement that I sort of disagree with is your criteria for remuneration. You say that the economy should reward people based on the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. I think that this is partly correct. I do agree that need should be a moral consideration for any humane economy. However, I also think that any good economic system will be able to produce goods and services well beyond basic human needs. This means that we also need criteria for remunerating goods and services that people want. So, for example I may not need a holiday to Greece next year or a new computer but I certainly want these things. How do libertarian communists propose that we work out who gets what they want and who doesn't?

Another part of your statement that I partly disagree with is your class analysis. You talk indistinguishably about “bosses” and “capitalist” as though they are the same class. To repeat your phrase there is “us and them” which implies a two class system. This outlook, I think derives from a limited conceptual toolbox that is quite typical of the old left. It is commonly held within left circles that there are two classes – the capitalist class and the working class. Such a view leads to statements such as “... communism has nothing to do with the former USSR or the present-day Cuba or North Korea. These are capitalist societies ...” Because the former USSR was not a workers economy it therefore has to be a capitalist economy – there simply isn't any other option for you to choose from.

But we all know that there is a big difference between an economic system with privately owned institutions operating within competitive markets and a government controlled system with central planning. Yes it is true that both systems are based on class exploitation and dominance but there are also very important differences. For example the dominant class in the first system are the capitalists whereas the dominant class in the second system are a professional-managerial class I call the coordinator class. So I would argue that the economy of the former USSR is more accurately described as a coordinator economy, rather than a capitalist (or for that matter socialist) economy.

This insight derives from a three-class analysis that argues that modern day capitalism has created a new techno-managerial class that is both distinguishable from the capitalist class above it and working class below it. One important outcome of this new class-consciousness is that we realise that the coordinator class can (and have been) anti-capitalist whilst not necessarily being pro-workers economy. Working class

organisations are often dominated by members of the coordinator class, and the coordinator class can, and has, hijacked popular movement against capitalism. Not surprisingly when popular movements of this sort have been successful in overthrowing capitalism it has tended to result in a coordinator economy (like the former USSR) and not in a classless economy.

This clarity is useful in a number of ways. It helps us understand where socialists went wrong in the twentieth century and it helps us develop better strategy for the twenty-first century.

When you do address vision you mainly talk about the whole society as being “stateless” and “democratic”. This is fine but I want to know about the economy. You do say about your economic vision that the means of production would be “held in common” and that “decisions can be made democratically among equals”, which I like – but you don’t say how this would work. What does the democratic process look like, and how do you maintain equality? You also say that there will be “no market forces” in your economy. Again I like this – but you don’t say what your alternative is. How will goods and services be allocated in your economic system? Regarding economic self-management you say - “We will work only as long as we decide is necessary to produce the things we need at an intensity we are happy with ...” Now, apart from your concern for only need, which I have already addressed above, that sounds great. But it still doesn’t answer the question - how, in a libertarian communist economy, do workers make the decisions about what to produce and how to produce them?

There are other important questions that I would like to ask, but I will leave it there for now. I look forward to reading your response and continuing this exchange.

libcom.org responds

Ok, it seems like there are a couple of small misunderstandings here that can be quickly addressed, and some more substantive differences in terms of class analysis and the relation of class to other 'oppressions.' I'll first try and clear up the misunderstandings and then get into the more substantive stuff.

Vision and Strategy

The first minor point of misunderstanding relates to the meaning of ‘vision.’ You separate vision – ends – from strategy – means. I would contend such a neat delineation is untenable. Ends are made of means – some means get us closer to what we want, others make it more remote. As the libcom group, we do not spend much time dreaming of the future – our politics are very much oriented to the here and now. Now it is true that having some idea of what a future society could look like can persuade others we’re

not just idle dreamers, nihilists who are against everything but don't know what we're for. But a fully worked-out vision of the future is not a prerequisite for workers to struggle to advance their concrete material interests. I doubt many of the workers who have made revolutions in the past started off as revolutionaries.

Of course as struggles grow, the importance of just which direction they should take – vision – grows too, and so it cannot be neglected. However, in the here and now we have a more immediate vision – for workers to struggle collectively to advance our interests. To this end we strategise; we try and network with other workers and spread propaganda advocating libertarian communist tactics – collective direct action and mass meetings with mandated/recallable delegate councils to co-ordinate the struggle. As and when this vision of mass assemblies is realised – as it was during the anti-CPE struggle in France on 2006 – the more long-term vision becomes more tangible and more meaningful to the participants, who begin to feel their power to change the world and to imagine what that world may be like.

Needs and wants

A second terminological misunderstanding to tidy up. 'Needs' in 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' does not mean mere physiological needs as distinct from wants. Needs are self determined, encompassing everything from the physiological to the psychological to the social, and everyone has an equal right to have their needs met. In terms of how this allocation could work and deal with any issues of scarcity, I've discussed this and other 'economic' issues much more comprehensively in my response to your vision. The structure of this debate could create much duplication, so I suggest we pre-empt that and continue this particular discussion there.

Race, sex, class...?

You say I "might be making the mistake of assuming that racial, gender and political groups are less important agents for social change than class." I think you misunderstand my meaning, and this series in fact obscures more than it reveals (and perhaps explains the misunderstanding). There is an odd one out; a different logic is at work with class politics. Whereas racial, gender, sexuality etc groups are striving to turn antagonism into difference, class politics tries to turn difference into antagonism. Whereas race- or gender-based struggles strive for recognition as equals and for co-existence; class struggle aims not at workers and bosses all getting along, but on the contrary aggravating their differences to the point of rupture and social revolution. It seems to me in its haste to declare all groups equal your perspective of 'complimentary holism' has no place for class antagonism.

Capitalism is a class relation, and class struggle is the only way to break out of it - by ultimately rejecting our condition as human resources and asserting ourselves as human beings. This can only be done with the abolition of social classes altogether. It's not about saying class is more important than other things, but about understanding what

capitalism is and where potential revolutionary subjectivity arises. It is not from oppression, but from alienation – the separation of producers from product, of activity from the meaning and control of that activity. The working class are potentially revolutionary subjects because of our material position within capitalist society; we've nothing to lose but our chains.

Many groups are oppressed, but racism, sexism etc are not essential to capitalism and demands for equality can be accommodated within it – indeed such demands are made by large sections of the ruling class. So while we get racist immigration controls, we also get black bosses, politicians and presidents. Female workers consistently earn less than their male counterparts, but this is made illegal. Margaret Thatcher being a woman didn't make her any less capitalist etc. In fact the recent Obamamania demonstrates just how useful these kind of egalitarian sentiments can be - when divorced from class analysis - for rebuilding shattered illusions in the system.

This is not to say capitalism does not make use of these divisions which predate it. Clearly it does, and racism and sexism are unfortunate facts of life. However capitalism is not inherently white, male, heterosexual etc, and therefore members of these groups have no more inherent potential for revolutionary subjectivity than white heterosexual males do. As I have said, that derives from alienation, not oppression. Now class struggle – and therefore the replacement of capitalism with a society fit for human habitation - won't get very far if workers are divided by 'race,' gender etc, and this is why I said that "the struggle against these divisions is therefore a necessary aspect of class struggle."

In this respect, while only class struggle can replace capitalism with a libertarian communist society, it absolutely must incorporate simultaneous struggles against racial, gender etc divides - a process which has been visible during many class struggles of the 20th Century (the Mujeres Libres, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Grunwick). So while we would take issue with any notion of a 'hierarchy of struggle', it's only by acting as a class where our potential revolutionary agency can be manifested, where these intra-class divisions can be negated rather than reinforced.

Central to modern communitarian politics and social control is the idea of 'celebrating diversity' - emphasising the differences between various groups and treating them as homogenous 'communities' without internal class divisions, adequately represented by a layer of small capitalists and professionals. The 'equality of struggles' - more accurately the relegation of class to just another struggle, an identity as constructed as race or gender rather than a material position - allows all these struggles to be co-opted and accommodated.

'Complimentary holism' seems to be a radical variant of this ideology; taking the capitalist division of social life into distinct spheres as given. The autonomy of the economy is based on the separation of producers from product. Politics is based on the

separation of rulers and ruled. Overcoming these separations will mean abolishing these divisions of social life, and this cannot be done if they are made central to our analysis.

I'm not sure what you mean by "political groups." If you mean politicised minorities such as ourselves, then we certainly have a role to play – largely in the propagation of our ideas (hence us running libcom!). But we are not agents of social change in our capacity as 'political groups,' but in our material position as workers (whether employed or not). In terms of revolutionary subjectivity, all groups are not created equal – although women, ethnic minorities, politicians etc are for the most part workers too. This has nothing to do with "dogmatically ideological prediction," and everything to do with a rational, critical understanding of what the capitalist social relation is and how it might be ruptured.

For what it's worth, just because a struggle may not have revolutionary potential does not make it of no interest to libertarian communists. We are interested in advancing our concrete material needs as a class; something like the struggle to legalise abortion in Northern Ireland would fit this category, without ever having revolutionary implications. However, a practice of asserting our class' concrete material needs in general does, because a society based on human needs is in fundamental contradiction to one based on the endless accumulation of capital.

Bipolar vs three-class analysis

You write "'us and them'... implies a two class system. This outlook, I think derives from a limited conceptual toolbox that is quite typical of the old left." Firstly I'm not sure who you mean by old left? The 57 varieties of Trotskyist vanguard party? Anarcho-syndicalists? Council communists? Zapata's peasant insurgency? Makhno's? All of the above? In any event I am not describing a two-class system, but a bipolar one. I will have to explain in a bit more detail what is meant by this, before returning to explain the usage of 'us and them.'

Firstly, to recap on what capital is, as briefly as possible: money making more money. But this doesn't happen by alchemy, but by human labour, which has the capacity to produce more than is needed to sustain it, a surplus which is appropriated to expand the original capital advanced. This establishes two poles of a spectrum. At the one end, those with nothing to sell but their capacity to work and nothing to lose but their chains. At the other, those with the capital to hire workers to expand their capital. Thus capital isn't just money in motion, but a social relation between classes. It is dead labour, which vampire-like sucks the life out of the living. This is the kind of analysis you find in the first few chapters of Marx's Capital, and I believe is what you are referring to as an 'old left two class system' view. But our analysis does not stop here. Indeed it has only just begun.

In order to accumulate capital, the capitalist must compete in the market with other capitalists. They cannot afford to ignore market forces, or they will lose ground to their rivals, lose money, and ultimately cease to be a capitalist. Therefore capitalists are not really in control of capitalism, capital itself is. Thus both poles of the social relation are alienated, but in a qualitatively different way. While at the workers end alienation is experienced through the impositions of the boss, at the other it is experienced through impersonal market forces. The fancy name for this process by which inanimate objects come to dominate actual living subjects is an 'ontological inversion.' It is on account of this inversion that we can talk about capital as if it has agency, and as we shall see this is more precise than talking about capitalists.

Now it is true that on this spectrum, there are those who are hired by capitalists to manage their capital, but own no capital themselves (the 'techno-managerial class' in your parlance). What matters for the time being is that they are on this bipolar spectrum. Knowledge is certainly a part of these individuals' power, but it is a power exercised within the bipolar social relation. For what it's worth, knowledge as a source of power within class society is not in itself a new insight – it was theorised over a century ago how the development of automation and factory production was driven by the need to undermine the power of the craft workers guilds, which was largely based on the knowledge essential to production which they jealously guarded.

There are also still peasants and aristocrats in the world. The important thing once more is that these classes too increasingly become arrayed along this bipolar spectrum. Peasants are dispossessed and become landless agricultural workers, or migrate to the cities. Aristocrats become real estate capitalists, or watch their estates fall into disrepair and cease to be aristocrats altogether. Capital - this vampire-like, bipolar social relation implied the simple notion of money making more money – comes to dominate and restructure social life in its interests.

Us and them

So how then do I square a notion of 'us and them' with my insistence I am not describing a two class system? It derives from workers experience in capitalism; 'they' are the personifications of capital through which this object exercises its agency as per the ontological inversion described above. Usually, the personification of capital is the boss. The boss may be a shareholding capitalist, or a hired manager. Under other circumstances we face union bureaucrats as the personifications of capital, as they divide and diffuse our struggles. Politicians, 'community leaders,' or in the case of co-ops operating in a market, workers themselves can also become the personifications of capital. They are compelled to act in the interests of capital by their structural position within the bipolar capital relation.

This is not a problem of "working class organisations... often dominated by members of the coordinator class." A union leader for example could have a background as salt of

the earth as they come, but still become the personification of capital due to their structural role in capitalist society. The same is true of 'techno-managerial' hirelings, politicians and capitalists themselves. You agreed with me when I said "the function of a class analysis is to understand the tensions within capitalist society" as opposed to classifying individuals into two, three (or four or five) classes. This is what it means.

This is not to say that you cannot describe bosses who don't own capital as distinct from those that do. Clearly there is a distinction. I would argue whether we theorise this as a class distinction or a division of labour within those who personify capital is of secondary importance to the fact this takes place within a bipolar social relation and the us an them nature of struggles this implies. You say "the coordinator class can (and have been) anti-capitalist." I would say this is only true in the absolute narrowest sense of 'capitalist' as 'those who own capital.' Being anti-capitalist does not mean being against those individuals, but against the whole social relation, against class society as such.

Anti-capitalism is not workers managing the economy in place of capitalists (or 'co-ordinators') but the abolition of ourselves as a class, the economy as a separate sphere of social life and the communisation of social production around our needs. Non-owning bosses taking the place of owning ones is no more anti-capitalist than a management buy-out, only potentially more violent and perhaps roping workers in to do the dirty work (as so tragically often workers die for one or other section of the ruling class, particularly in war). But the role of the personification of capital persists, in the firm bought out by its management as in the USSR. This is because capitalism is a mode of production not a mode of management. Therefore anti-capitalism has to go beyond opposition to those who manage it (juxtaposing a participatory economy to a 'co-ordinatorist' or capitalist one), to opposition to the social relation as such (the abolition of wage labour, politics and the economy as a separate spheres of social life; libertarian communism).

You write that "this clarity [three classes] is useful in a number of ways. It helps us understand where socialists went wrong in the twentieth century and it helps us develop better strategy for the twenty-first century." However, while I welcome the desire not to retread the cul-de-sacs of Leninism, this overlooks the fact that many in the 20th century workers movement – particularly anarchists – argued against the idea that the state or any form of representation could abolish capitalism. Perhaps more significantly it ignores that what happened in Russia in 1917 wasn't an unforeseen side-effect of workers relying on 'co-ordinators,' but a conscious policy of state capitalism pursued by the Bolsheviks, the consequences of which were broadly predicted by anarchists, who had argued such an approach would just replace many capitalists with one – the state – not replace capitalist social relations with communist ones. The precise nature of the USSR is a big question, and a big tangent. Good sources include the Anarchist FAQ [1], Aufheben's 4-part series [2] and Maurice Brinton's 'The Bolsheviks

and Workers Control' [3], all of which explain how the social relations remained fundamentally capitalist, with the state taking the place of individual owners.

We certainly do need to theorise the conditions in which we find ourselves in light of past failures. I would simply say I don't think this requires a third class, and in fact this 'innovation' seems to distract from the necessity and importance of class antagonism, relegating class to just another oppression and posing the anti-capitalist task as simply a question of management – by capitalists, co-ordinators or ourselves? - not social revolution. We are not trying to make the same world more participatory, but to create a new one in its place.

There is much more I could write about, such as the tendency for society to polarise into haves and have nots, and the counter-tendencies stratifying individuals along the spectrum through the proliferation of minor hierarchies (team leaders etc) and the division of the ruling class into idle shareholders and bosses you call 'techno-managerial.' But I've probably said enough for now, and I'm sure we can return to these issues if they prove relevant to the discussion as it develops.

[1] See <http://www.infoshop.org/faq/secH3.html#sech313>

[2] Published in issues #6-9, available at <http://libcom.org/aufheben>

[3] Available free at <http://libcom.org/library/the-bolsheviks-and-workers-control-solidarity-group>

The Project for a Participatory Society's vision

Hi, my name is Mark Evans. I live in Birmingham (UK) where I work for the National Health Service (NHS) as a Health Care Assistant (HCA) on a neuro-surgical ward. In addition to doing my work as a HCA I am also an active trade union member. These activities bring together two main interests of mine – neurology / psychology and social justice which in turn I see as being related to broader issues regarding human nature and social organisation.

Over the past two or three years I have also been involved in helping to set up a new UK based initiative call PPS-UK (Project for a Participatory Society - www.ppsuk.org.uk). This initiative is part of a growing international network that, I think I am right in saying, has emerged as a result of two basic factors. One factor has to do with dissatisfaction with existing ideas for progressive social transformation. The other factor has been the development of new vision and strategy that has resulted from a complete reassessment of left-wing theory and practice. This important work continues today mainly via ZCom (www.zcommunications.org) where anybody with an interest in progressive ideas can participate through various facilities, including an on-line school.

My understanding here is that we are to debate “economic vision”. This assumes that we are, to some extent, unhappy with the existing economic system. Personally I would say that I am against every major institutional feature of capitalism. But this is not a new position for me that has been brought on by the present economic crisis. On the contrary, I would argue that by any humane standards capitalism is always in crisis. Just think of all the people who are dying from malnutrition unnecessarily every day, or who are not receiving medication for curable diseases. These are well known examples but there are many other illustrations of ongoing economic crisis that are virtually unknown. For example, research undertaken over the last 20 years shows that even after material needs are met economic inequality has a major impact on the health of a society. The bigger the inequality gap the more unhealthy the society - and we are not just talking about income here. It seems that levels of control and participation are what really matter and that this has a direct affect on our health and life expectancy.

So, from this perspective I would argue that capitalism is in a permanent state of crisis and that the present crisis we are all hearing about everyday on the news has more to do with a system that primarily functions in the interests of elite's becoming unstable. Putting aside this narrow and selfish definition of crisis lets try to understand why capitalism is in a permanent state of crisis before developing or talking about alternative economic vision.

My basic explanation would derive from a simple economic analysis that can be understood by virtually anyone. As I have already said, capitalist economic functions in the interest of elites. The reasons for this are pretty obvious.

Under capitalism, a very small minority privately owns economic institutions. This group is commonly known as the capitalist class. Also, the hierarchical division of labour allows for decision-making authority and empowering tasks to be monopolised by another privileged group. This is a not so commonly understood group I call the coordinator class. This arrangement leaves the vast majority, who are commonly referred to as the working class, to follow orders from above and undertake mostly undesirable tasks that are often mind numbing. What's more, capitalist economics rewards ownership, privilege and power thus institutionalising a system of remuneration that maintains inequality and class exploitation and dominance.

Straight away we can see that an economic system with this set-up is not going to function in the interests of the common good. But there is more bad news! In addition to production taking place within institutions that are privately owned, with authoritarian decision-making and a hierarchical division of labour, and consumption levels being determined by ownership and power, capitalism allocates its produce via competitive markets.

Competitive markets create a stressful economic environment whereby everyone is pitted against everyone else. In order to survive businesses are forced to employ strategies and tactics that do not take into account the true social cost of their activities. In such a competitive environment corporations simply cannot afford to take too much notice of the environmental consequences of their actions, of workers rights, or of the basic needs of the general public. Unless public relations requires it the capitalist economic system does not and cannot allow for serious considerations of such important issues.

From this simple analysis we can see that capitalism institutionalises economic inequality and systematically distorts economic priorities. In the short term this benefits a small minority but at the expense of the vast majority (and in the end to the detriment of everyone) – hence the permanent economic crisis.

But what is the alternative to capitalist economics? What would a sustainable economic system that functions in the interests of the common good look like? More precisely – What is the alternative to private ownership? What is the alternative to production taking place within a hierarchical division of labour and via authoritarian decision-making? What is the alternative to consumption levels being determined by remuneration for ownership, privilege and power? What is the alternative to competitive markets as a means of allocating the goods and services we produce and consume?

I believe that these are the core questions that anti-capitalists must have answers to. Advocates of participatory economics (ParEcon) propose the following as answers to these questions –

Social Ownership: In a participatory economy private ownership is replaced by democratically run worker and consumer councils. Although advocates of ParEcon tend to talk about social ownership as an alternative to private ownership it is probably more accurate to say that ownership in a participatory economy would become something of a none issue.

Self-management: As we have seen ParEcon institutions are democratically ran. But as we all know “democracy” is a term used to describe all sorts of systems, including ones that are very elitist. For this reason, and to avoid confusion, we talk of “self-management” as a specific type of economic democracy. For us self-management means that everyone gets a say in a decision in proportion to how much they are affected by the outcome of that decision. So for example, if the outcome of a decision only affects me then I have absolute say in that decision – everyone else has zero say. On the other hand if the outcome of a decision affects a work mate and me equally (and no one else) then we both have equal say in that decision, and so on and so forth.

Balanced Job Complexes: As an alternative to the hierarchical division of labour, whereby some jobs are more desirable and empowering than others, we propose “balanced job complexes” (BJC). BJs are jobs that are made up of an equal mix of empowering / desirable and not so empowering / desirable tasks. In a participatory economy everyone has a BJC. They are considered a necessary economic feature if self-management is to function and be maintained. They still allows for specialisation but without privilege. It also means that the suppressed skills and talent that are lost under the hierarchical division of labour can be utilised in a ParEcon making it more efficient.

Participatory Planning: Instead of competitive markets, in a participatory economy, goods and services are allocated via a process call “participatory planning”. This process involves a series of rounds in which producers and consumers propose and revise their economic activities in co-operation with each other via an “Iteration Facilitation Board” until an efficient and equitable plan is arrived at.

Effort and Sacrifice: With private ownership gone, along with authoritarian decision-making and the hierarchical division of labour, we can no longer reward ownership, privilege and power. Instead, advocates of ParEcon propose rewarding effort and sacrifice as fair criteria for remuneration. By this we mean that if a person works longer or harder, or if a person undertakes tasks that are generally considered to be less desirable then they should be entitled to more reward.

Individually these features represent alternatives to every major institutional feature of capitalism. Together they represent an alternative economic system to capitalism. They describe means by which production, consumption and allocation can systematically take place in the interest of the common good and in ways that are both sustainable and

efficient. They also institutionalises egalitarian control over economic life which in turn nurtures social cohesion.

I think that this represents the kind of long-term vision the anti-capitalist movement is in dire need of. For without such a vision it is highly unlikely that anti-capitalists will be able to organise the popular and effective movement we desire and need.

libcom.org responds

Firstly, I'd like to say that amongst us in the libcom group, we fully subscribe to the view that radical thought is of necessity critical thought, and that applies to our own ideas and activities as much as to the social conditions in which we live. We welcome any attempts to critically reassess anti-capitalist theory and practice and are excited at the chance to discuss these ideas with you as while there is clearly much common ground here in terms of what we oppose and what we propose in its place, there are also some important, perhaps crucial differences.

An initial comment I would make on reading your piece is that in the guise of novelty and a laudable desire to learn from the failures of twentieth century socialism, several of the key features of the vision you set out appear to be an atavistic reprise of failed nineteenth century socialism. In my reply, I'll try to address each of the 5 tenets in turn, in order to substantiate this claim, to try and draw out the problems it represents, and of course also to show where the common ground is between us. Whilst this is a debate about visions, I believe ends are made of means, and so it is impossible to discuss a future society in isolation from the desired means of getting there.

Social Ownership

Any differences here would be purely semantic. I tend to talk about communising the means of production rather than socialising them, but this is largely due to the common association of socialisation and nationalisation, as well as the fact the term communisation comes from a theoretical milieu that sees this process as concomitant with that of social revolution, not something that can happen gradually in bit-parts, or something to be done following a 'transitional period.' As you say, whatever we call it, the point is that ownership becomes a non-issue.

Self-management

It is true that democracy is an ambiguous term (a term I'm not actually that keen on for this very reason). But so is self-management, and indeed most political terminology. I think there is a danger of fetishising self-management per se, without regard to the question '...of what?' While your vision clearly contextualises it in a socially owned

economy, I think you (as in PPS) do fall into this trap with regard to your current practice. This fetishism is clearly apparent in the dual strategies of 'participatory credit unions to set up participatory businesses' and a 'project for a participatory trade union movement.' The problems are as follows.

The historical credit union/co-operative movement failed not because it wasn't participatory enough, but because you cannot out-accumulate the accumulators. While workers co-ops may serve some purposes in the present (such as AK Press publishing radical literature that would be unlikely to get printed otherwise), they do not represent a strategy for social change because to do so they would have to out-compete existing capitalist firms. To be more competitive you have to keep costs down and increase productivity, and so you end up 'participatorily' imposing the requirements of capital on yourself, instead of a boss doing it (with the concomitant possibility of resistance).

Brighton, where I live is something of a haven for workers co-ops. A friend of mine works for one of them, a refuse/recycling company, and the conditions there in terms of pay and hours are considerably worse than at the council service Cityclean. Now Cityclean has one of the most militant workforces in the city, with a history of wildcat actions including occupations to secure their conditions against both private ('capitalist') and state ('co-ordinatorist') bosses. Capital is a class relation, and any strategy for abolishing it cannot avoid class confrontation and struggle. This brings us to the question of trade unions.

Now the last century has been full of failed attempts to reform the trade unions, and we have to ask that even if it somehow possible to succeed where others have failed, why is it a worthwhile goal? To me it seems that our orientation should be towards actual working class struggle, not a particular form (trade unions) that it often takes. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, any reform attempts that seriously threatened the unions role as 'social partners' to management would require a significant upsurge in militancy from the membership to force through (Unison recently witch-hunted members who advocated a no vote to pay cuts against an official policy of neutrality; imagine the response of the bureaucrats to demands for their abolition!). So even if you think it's a good idea to reform the unions, you'd need to focus on building the actual class struggle.

Secondly, the trade union form rapidly becomes a barrier to the extension and development of workers struggles. Trade unions are bound by restrictive legislation that essentially outlaws effective action. Bosses must be given sufficient notice of industrial action to allow them to take mitigating measures, while secondary solidarity action is unlawful. Picket lines are restricted to ineffectual size, independent wildcat action is unlawful must be repudiated and so on... Furthermore, the unions act as a division between different groups of workers (non-members/members of other unions) in the

same and different workplaces who share the same interests, acting as a barrier to common class action.

Several of the libcom collective are shop stewards in the public sector and have experienced these problems first hand, with the unions managing to impose real-terms pay cuts on their members despite support for industrial action. In contrast to an approach focussing on reforming the unions, we advocate developing other forms of struggle (which may well also meet your participatory criteria). In particular we advocate mass meetings of all workers regardless of union membership, for these mass meetings to control the struggle and make links with other mass meetings in other sectors, and as and when such assemblies form for them to co-ordinate their activities across divisions of employer, sector and union via means of mandated/recallable delegate councils.

These criticisms relate more to how a vision of self-management is reflected in contemporary practice. Criticisms aside, the idea that those affected by decisions should make them seems uncontroversial, although the specifics of whether this is left to simple or specific majority vote, consensus or complex proportional weighting systems is context-dependent. My preference would be for the most simple practicable (generally simple majority vote), but this is to be decided by those affected, of course! For example we use consensus minus 2 in the libcom collective, a group of 10 people, which works well for us.

Balanced Job Complexes

The principle here seems sensible. Nobody should be consigned to a life of menial chores, and nobody should monopolise the more enjoyable/empowering roles in society. Thus balanced job complexes recognise the need to transform the way our productive activity is organised in an egalitarian manner around human needs. If there is a problem here, it is that there's a danger of taking work as an activity separate from life as a given, and simply seeking to democratise it.

Communism has always sought the abolition of work, not simply its reorganisation. Of course this doesn't mean the abolition of productive human activity! There may only be semantic differences here, but it needs to be recognised that the separation between work and life is a product of capitalist society, and that many tasks that become boring, repetitive and dull under capitalism are potentially rewarding activities in and of themselves once stripped of the restrictions imposed by market discipline and workplace hierarchy.

Consequently the task is not just to re-organise work in a fairer manner, but to abolish it as a separate category of social activity. Of course it's unlikely all menial tasks can be abolished or automated, and it therefore makes sense to have an egalitarian division of labour for productive activity, which seems to be the purpose of balanced job complexes.

Participatory Planning

Unfortunately here a fetish for participation per se again raises its head. I think you fall into the same hubristic trap as central planners here by assuming something so vast, complex and dynamic as total social production can be rationally planned at a macro level. Whether that plan is the product of a few bureaucrats in the central committee or of a peerlessly participatory process of iterative planning taking into account the desires of 6 billion people is somewhat secondary.

The reason market-based capitalism prospered over its central planning rival is that markets are decentralised, adaptive and flexible, and that macro-level order is emergent, not designed. Now we don't need to recap the criticisms of markets here, I think we're both on the same page with regard to the fact the emergent order is one that reflects purchasing power and not human need, so countries export grain for cattle consumption while people starve etc. However, there is a lesson in terms of flexibility and emergent order.

It seems to me a single annual plan, however participatorily arrived at is no more flexible than those of central planners, perhaps less so since mass participation in amending it would take much longer than diktat. In contrast I would suggest that production is oriented on a 'pull' basis responding to consumption, producing in response to what is consumed according to the maximum output from the desired, socially agreed working day. If demand outstrips supply in one area, extra workers and/or raw materials can be requested from others.

To mediate any scarcity, priority sectors could be drawn up by various participatory means (such as federations of councils), and rotating/elected recallable delegate committees could handle the minutiae. So for instance you'd expect basic physiological needs to be high priority, and luxury goods to be low priority, with a whole spectrum of other goods arrayed somewhere in the middle. In this manner, the total social plan would be emergent and flexible, and subject to democratic amendment by means of adjusting the order of priority sectors/goods.

Remunerating Effort and Sacrifice

Following the advocacy of credit unions and co-operatives/'participatory businesses', this is the second unfortunate reprise of 19th century politics. Way back in 1865, Karl Marx wrote of the trade unions of his day "instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'" Even if one thinks Marx is archaic, this would be even more true of his conservative opponents.

Communism is about reducing effort and sacrifice not raising them to fundamental principles as a sort of secular protestant work ethic. Remuneration for effort and sacrifice is based on the same assumptions of human behaviour as neoclassical

economics (that as price reaches 0, demand increases exponentially), which are demonstrably false (there are some interesting anthropological studies to this effect, as well as the everyday experience that if tea and coffee is free at work we don't all overdose on caffeine, or all become hypochondriacs when there's free universal healthcare etc).

Wages, however 'fair' are a form of rationing, which is itself a response to scarcity. There are two ways to tackle scarcity, which naturally complement one another. Firstly, the rational reorganisation of production to meet human need eliminates the wasteful production of built-to-fail commodities and introduces efficiencies close to impossible under atomised market relations (such as district heating vs household combi-boilers, decentralised renewable energy production networks, urban planning oriented more towards social community living and public mass transit, not private cars etc). This reduces scarcity. However, we can't bank on eliminating it, so some form of rationing would then be required.

The question then becomes why retain 'fair' wage-rationing, considered conservative a century-and-a-half ago? We would probably agree that access to having your basic physiological needs met should be pretty unconditional, and that everyone should have access to sufficient food, housing, healthcare etc. There is no reason for these things to be scarce, for example already there's enough food production capacity in the world to prevent famine, but hunger persists for lack of purchasing power. And if a given healthcare treatment were scarce, we surely wouldn't allocate it to the highest bidder.

The question of scarcity would arise with more 'intermediate' and luxury goods. There are a myriad of ways this scarcity could be managed, each with their own pros and cons. You could simply have first come, first served allocation. This would probably be sufficient for most goods, since production organised on a pull basis would increase accordingly at the expense of less socially prioritised goods. You could allocate everyone an equal share, but this creates the potential for black markets as peoples needs are not all identical. You could have a lottery for luxury items.

You could also have some form of needs-testing, which could incorporate effort. So for example if the amount of flights were restricted by collective decision on ecological grounds, having relatives abroad or having worked particularly hard could give you a better claim to a flight. Of course any body deciding on these matters would need to be mandated, rotating and/or elected/recallable so as to be properly accountable. Even if it was felt with all these potential means of managing scarcity, some form of remuneration was required (I'd disagree), it would surely be for excess effort and applicable only to scarce luxury items, not made a foundational principle of society.

The final point is that without wages mediating access to consumption, why should people put any effort into producing at all? I would say that if productive activity in

common is so unappealing that a significant proportion of the population abstain, then there has been no revolution in social relations. Furthermore there are plenty of organic ways to discourage slackers (from social stigma through to formal sanction) and reward those who give that bit extra to the collective (such as cooking them a meal, throwing them a party or seconding them for that scarce flight to Hawaii).

The vision you outline seems to take a very economic view of human beings, with productive activity seen as necessarily unappealing, and pecuniary incentives the only way to make people do it or sanction those who don't do it enough. This simply underlines the fact the abolition of work (and thus the economy) as a separate sphere of social life is paramount to any revolutionary project.

I've tried to be concise, but in discussing the potential future social organisation of the lives of billions, there is a lot of ground to cover. I hope I've highlighted the points of agreement and outlined where our differences lie, and the implications of these differences for both the society we hope to create, and the means by which we hope to create it.

PPS' response

Hi Joseph – thanks for your reply to my opening statement. Like you I also believe that we should be as critical of our own organisations and traditions as those of the establishment, and that dogmatism has nothing to do with genuine radical-progressive culture. I therefore welcome your criticisms of the participatory economic vision I advocate.

Some of what you write in your reply however is not a criticism of participatory economic vision but instead focuses on strategic proposals posted on the PPS-UK website. I have chosen not to respond to these parts of your reply for the following reasons. 1) I don't mention these proposals in my opening statement. 2) These proposals are made by members and are there to be considered and discussed, improved upon etc. It may well be the case that many of the PPS-UK members would agree with much of your criticisms of these proposals. I for one think that your historical account of the failings of the cooperative and trade union movements carries some weight and I also like the sound of the proposals you mention that LibCom promote, for example "mass meetings" which, incidentally I see as compatible with ParEcon strategy. 3) As interesting as your criticisms of these proposals are, we are here to debate vision for a post-capitalist economy – not anti-capitalist strategy. This brings me to a point I

would like to highlight before moving on to reply to your comments on the defining institutional features of the ParEcon model.

Ends and Means: When you say that “whilst this is a debate about vision, I believe ends are made of means, and so it is impossible to discuss a future society in isolation from the desired means of getting there” I think you might have highlighted one of the “important, perhaps crucial differences” you mentioned in your reply to my opening statement.

In a sense I do agree that ends (vision) are made of means (strategy). However, your statement seems to suggest that your vision will emerge from your strategy. This, I think, explains why, in your opening statement you talk so much about LibCom strategy and why you dragged strategic proposals from the PPS-UK site into a discussion on participatory economic vision. In contrast I would argue that vision should inform strategy. So yes, ends are made of means, but effective strategy can only be developed if we have a good idea of where we are going

I suspect that this basic difference in approach may explain many of the differences that are already beginning to show in this exchange. It may be the case that if we can address this issue at this fundamental level many of the differences that are beginning to show will disappear. I therefore think that it might be worth exploring this difference in approach in more detail.

Economic Vision: You say that ParEcon “seems to take a very economistic view of human beings”. In the hope of addressing this criticism I will need to very quickly explain the broader project I am involved in. Our overall programme at PPS-UK includes efforts in developing vision and strategy, not only in the economic sphere, but also in the community, kinship and political spheres. Furthermore, the development of vision and strategy within these four social spheres takes place within a broader theoretical framework called “complimentary holism”. This framework was conceptualised as an attempt to transcend historical materialism (which I think does put the economy at the centre of all things, resulting in all kinds of distortions of understanding etc) and is a conscious effort at addressing the kinds of problems with economism and other monist frameworks that you mention. In contrast the complimentary holist framework makes no before-the-facts assumption about the dominance of any one social sphere over any other. I therefore suspect that the “economic view” that you see in the vision I outline has to do with the simple fact that we are discussing economic vision where there will be a natural focus on economics. The same would apply if we were focusing in on the community sphere. There would be a natural bias towards cultural issues, but we should not conclude from this that such a discussion meant that we were promoting a “culturalistic” view of human beings – at least not when it is taking place within a complimentary holistic framework.

Social Ownership: You say that “Any difference here would be purely semantic” and that “whatever we call it, the point is that ownership becomes a non-issue.” I think that this is essentially correct. However, you raise a very important point when you say that you “tend to talk about communising ... rather than socialising”. Your reason has to do with the negative “common association” of the term. Again, I agree with you, but I also feel that there is an equally bad (if not worse) association connected with communism. This is true whether we like it or not. We both know that using terms that carry negative connotations can put people off listening to our ideas, even before we really begin to talk to them. Or if it doesn’t put them off completely from the start we can end up talking to them about how their understanding of the term is incorrect or distorted, which means we spend most of our limited time trying to undo years of propaganda. An alternative approach that gets around these problems might be for us to develop new terms that capture what we are talking about, and maybe does so better, but without the negative associations. So, as an alternative to private ownership, but without the bad connotations of social / communal ownership, I would like you to consider the notion of “societal stewardship” as a term that achieves this function.

Self-management: You say that “the idea that those affected by decisions should make them seems uncontroversial” and I agree. But I’m not just saying that those affected by decisions should make them – as, for example with direct democracy. I’m arguing for a more specific and (as I see it) meaningful notion of self-management. Advocates of ParEcon say that people should have a say in a decision in proportion to the degree that they are affected by the outcome of a decision. We feel that as a decision-making principle this is fair simply because the people who are most affected by a decision should have more say than those who are less affected. This means that under certain conditions whole groups of people may have zero say in a decision whilst in other circumstances an individual might have absolute say. In contrast, with direct democracy it is typical for all who are affected by a decision to have equal say regardless of how much they are affected by the outcome of that decision. This usually translates into advocates of direct democracy advocating one-person one-vote on all issues – which, in my opinion, is neither fair nor practical. The ParEcon notion of self-management also contrasts with democratic centralism in obvious ways – but I don’t think I need to go into that here.

Balanced Job Complexes: Here it seems that we are in agreement. You rightly state “it’s unlikely all menial tasks can be abolished or automated, and it therefore makes sense to have an egalitarian division of labour for productive activity, which seems to be the purpose of balanced job complexes”.

Where I think there might be differences of opinion is over the extent to which work could be abolished as opposed to re-organised. I have to say that I find it very difficult to take serious a post-capitalist economic vision that states the “abolition of work” as one of its main objective. However, what I would say (and perhaps this is what you are

getting at) is that in a participatory economy workers will feel differently about their work because they will no longer be alienated from their workplace. But in a ParEcon everyone will still have a job – but one that is partly made up of tasks that are not very desirable. So there will still be an economic system in which work takes place. The important difference for advocates of ParEcon is that BJs overcome the anti-social consequences of a hierarchical division of labour and make economic activity both fairer and more efficient.

Participatory Planning: In your reply to my opening statement on allocation you rightly point out that we are both market abolitionists. In place of markets I advocate participatory planning which you criticise saying that I “fall into the same hubristic trap as central planners ... by assuming something so vast, complex and dynamic as total social production can be rationally planned ...” Here I will happily plead guilt as charged. But having done so I will make two short statements in my defence before briefly commenting on your alternative to markets.

First I want to be very clear that although I agree with advocates of central planning when they argue that large scale economic activity can be rationally planned I don't agree with their means of arriving at a rational plan. I would argue that, whilst central planning is an alternative to markets, it also results in an economic system that is dominated by professional managers which is usually associated with socialist systems but is, in my opinion, more accurately described as coordinator economics.

Second, it seems that your reasons for rejecting participatory planning as an alternative to markets is because of its overall inefficiency and lack of flexibility. You say that “a single annual plan, however participatorily arrived at is no more flexible than those of central planners, perhaps less so since mass participation in amending it would take much longer than diktat”.

Now, from my very brief description in my opening statement, I can understand why you would think that participatory planning is an inflexible process. However, a fuller understanding reveals a much more sophisticated process that is capable of accommodating changes in wants and needs. So, for example, if someone wants to change an item they submitted as part of the annual plan for a different one then we can assume that some of these kinds of changes will be cancelled out by other changes made by other members of that consumer council. So we can already see that there is some room for flexibility. Admittedly however, this only allows for limited flexibility. The real question is, what happens when changes cannot be cancelled out by other changes?

Here changes in demand from consumer councils could be fed to the Iteration Facilitation Board (IFB) that in turn could feed this information to the workers councils where renegotiations can take place between the relevant worker and consumer

federations. It is here that we see that the participatory planning process has great potential for flexibility.

Now I would guess that you'd consider this solution to your perceived inflexibility of participatory planning process as being inefficient. One important point I would like to make is that this renegotiation only involves those who are affected by the changes – the rest of the annual plan remains the same. The point is that any changes to the annual plan do not require participation from everyone.

Another related point regarding efficiency of the planning process is that the annual plan is not arrived at via one big meeting – which for obvious reasons would be completely impractical. Instead we propose a planning process that involves three main institutions – workers councils and federations, consumers councils and federations, and the Iteration Facilitations Board. An annual plan is arrived at by a series of co-operative rounds between consumers and workers that are facilitated by the IFB. Participants have ample time to consider their proposals which can be informed by the previous years plan and current information on costs etc available from the IFB. This process takes place at appropriate levels within the federations so that the wants and needs of various groups of people within society, from the individual to a whole nation, can be taken into account.

There are many other finer points to be made about the participatory planning process but I am conscious of going on too much and so will leave it there for now in the hope that we can continue to clarify our understanding as we proceed.

But before moving on I feel I should respond to your alternative to markets. "In contrast" to what you saw as the rigid and cumbersome participatory planning process you "suggest that production is orientated on a 'pull' basis responding to consumption..." On first reading this I have to say that, given your apparent opposition to rational planning, it sounds to me like a market system guided by an "invisible hand". But then you go on to say that "If demand outstrips supply in one area, extra workers and / or raw material can be requested from others" which does suggest some kind of rational planning process. You then go on to sketch-out how this process could work, concluding that "the total social plan would be emergent and flexible, and subject to democratic amendment by means of adjusting the order or priority sector / goods." Now, although still vague, this sounds a little closer to the participatory planning process. I therefore look forward to learning more about how your system for allocation in a post-capitalist economy actually functions. I hope that we can at least clarify where the similarities and differences are within our systems.

Remunerating Effort and Sacrifice: I have to admit that I don't understand a lot of what you say in response to the ParEcon criteria for remuneration. You quote Karl Marx at me as saying "abolition of the wages system!" then suggest that anyone who disagrees with this is "conservative". I'm no Marxologist but I suspect that when Marx called for the

abolition of the wage system he was referring to a system whereby workers have to rent themselves out to capitalists as wage slaves. Yes, in a ParEcon we would remunerate for effort and sacrifice and if you want to call this reward “wages” then fine. But the important point here is that in a participatory economy there are no wage slaves – a point that I suspect Karl Marx (as well as Kropotkin, Bakunin, Rocker etc...) would appreciate.

So in a participatory economy we have a system of reward based on effort and sacrifice but because ParEcon is a classless economy there are no wage slaves. This means that if you and I both have the same job at the same workplace and I work longer or harder than you then I get more credit for consumption. I think that this is a fair criteria for remuneration and if advocating such a criteria makes me a conservative then so be it – although I have to say that I don’t recall any conservatives advocating remuneration for effort and sacrifice.

Although at first you argue for the abolition of wages, in the end you do recognise that “some form of rationing would ... be required” once basic needs are met and regarding what you call “intermediate and luxury goods”. You say “There are a myriad of ways this scarcity could be managed” and give examples such as “first come, first served”, “lottery” or “needs testing”. Taking the last suggestion first, I would say that if it is a need that we are being tested for then it would not be an intermediate or luxury good and therefore in your future economy would presumably have been taken care of already. Regarding your other two suggestions it seems to me that instead of rewarding people based on a fair criteria (like effort and sacrifice) you want to rewards them for luck (lottery) or aggressiveness (first come first served). Again, if being opposed to such blatantly unfair criteria for remuneration makes me a conservative then I’m happy to be called a conservative – although, for reasons already given, I don’t think that the argument stands up.

That’s it for now – I look forward to reading your reply.

libcom.org responds

Mark, thanks for your response. Again there seems to be a mixture of points of agreement, genuine political differences and simple misunderstandings (which may be for lack of clarity on my part). Obviously I’ll focus on the differences and misunderstandings, which may give the impression we have less in common than we in fact do. It will probably be worth recapping our points of agreement at some point, precisely to contextualize the differences and avoid such a skewed perception. For now

though to aid clarity, I'll try and address the points one at a time in the same order you have.

Vision and strategy, ends and means

It's true that your opening statement didn't make reference to the PPS strategies on your website. However, the neat separation of 'vision' and 'strategy' is precisely one of the 'important, perhaps crucial differences' in this debate – as you correctly note. I mentioned the PPS strategies to point out the pitfalls of fetishising 'participation' and 'self-management' per se. That is to say I mentioned them to give a concrete example to back up criticisms of your vision that might otherwise have appeared quite abstract.

I'm glad you see some merits in these criticisms; they are intended constructively and out of a desire to contribute to effective anti-capitalist practice. In fact if you're attracted to the idea of mass assemblies as a means to co-ordinate struggles, I'd like to extend an invitation to share a pint (or three!) and discuss strategies for realising this vision, as there may well be scope for practical co-operation. However, when you write "your statement seems to suggest that your vision will emerge from your strategy", I think you misunderstand what I mean by 'the end is made of means.'

We do have a vision of a classless, stateless, non-mercantile society without money, commodity production and exchange and work as a separate activity, guided by the maxim 'from each according to ability, to each according to need.' We believe that only certain means can create this end, and that these means ('strategy' in your parlance) therefore form a part of our vision. As this is a discussion of our respective 'visions for the UK economy' – with no specification of post-capitalism – we think this more immediate vision is a necessary part of the debate (indeed we have strategies to realise our more immediate vision of mass assemblies, confirming that they are indeed a 'vision' in your terminology).

So we do have a vision in your sense of the word – a vision that extends from the present to the future. What we do think is likely to grow out of means is not vision, but the specific details of its implementation. For example, councils formed to co-ordinate a revolutionary struggle may also begin to co-ordinate and reorganise production as workplaces are seized, as well as deciding on the appropriate decision-making procedures for example.

We can make suggestions as to how such a society might work, and indeed we are doing so in the course of this debate. But these are no blueprint, merely an exposition of possibility. We think it unlikely that would-be political 'thinkers' such as ourselves can anticipate all the details of a future society – no society has ever been designed in such a way in advance (indeed the desire to do so is another characteristic of 19th century socialism, and the utopian strand in particular).

Necessity is the mother of all invention, so while we can offer a guiding vision and some speculation as to how it could work, the details will need to be filled in by the self-organisation of millions, whose collective genius far exceeds that of any individual or group of intellectuals. This is not a cop out – as I say we do make suggestions as to how a libertarian communist society could be organised – but an informed humility.

Holism and materialism

Another point you make is to juxtapose your 'complimentary holism' to 'historical materialism.' Now if you're referring to the dogmatic, 2nd International Marxism with its crude economic determinism, we join you in rejecting it. However, our approach is historical, in that we seek to draw lessons from past struggles and ideas. And it is also materialist, in the sense it sees all phenomena as consisting of material interactions, including ideas, which even as they influence the material world are seen as a product, or rather an aspect of it. Philosophically speaking, materialism is a monist philosophy as it sees only the material world existing at an ontological level (as opposed to mind-body dualism etc). However, it appears the monism you refer to is the privileging of one sphere of human action over all others. This merits some discussion.

We do place class analysis and the accumulation imperative as central to our understanding of capitalism and how to abolish it. But this is not (to use your words) a "before the facts" a priori assertion, but an a posteriori one; that is one arising from rational, critical enquiry into social phenomenon. So when we try to understand the persistence of starvation and malnutrition in a world of calorie surplus, we cannot but note the impact of export-led growth policies that see countries export grain to feed cattle to export to relatively affluent markets while the populations of the exporting countries go hungry. When we try and understand the world's unswerving course towards catastrophic climate change despite scientific consensus as to the causes and the severity of the consequences, we cannot but conclude that the capitalist imperative to 'grow or die' over-rides all else, perhaps even human life on earth.

When we look at things like social and urban geography, urbanisation and the global spread of shanty towns for example cannot be understood without looking at factors of economic development, that is the spread of capitalist social relations into the countryside, turning peasants into landless workers, many of whom are forced to migrate to the cities to scrape out a living. If one considers the family, the decline of the traditional patriarchal nuclear family in the developed economies over the past four decades mirrors a shift from an economy based on the work of male breadwinners in factories to one based on an increasingly casualised, mixed-sex workforce in the service sector. Cause and effect is not immediately apparent, correlation doesn't equal causation, but yet it requires us to take note and account for it. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James wrote an influential pamphlet on how the roles of housewives and the

patriarchal family are bound up with factory discipline, drawing heavily on the experiences of housewives themselves [1].

Now none of these phenomena can be reduced to the economy, still less do we dogmatically assert so. But this underlines a further point of importance: capital as a class system is a social relation, not merely an economic one. It shapes society, and to discuss capital and class is not to reduce society to the economy, but rather to understand the ways in which this vampire-like relation, sucking life out of the living comes to shape society in its interests, and against ours. So when we talk about capitalism and class struggle, we are not just talking about the economy and workplace disputes respectively, but society as a whole, and the struggles that take place in society between the dispossessed and those who represent the interests of capital .

Social ownership, and loaded jargon

You point out how communism is a loaded term with many negative connotations. This is certainly true, and why we prefix ourselves as libertarian communists, even though communism has always referred to a free, stateless society (even to someone as far from our politics as Lenin, though once a head of state he kinda dropped that objective). As a general rule we try to avoid loaded political jargon altogether in outward-looking media we produce (such as the newswire section of our website, or the Tea Break dispute bulletin we've been involved in producing [2]).

In debates such as this however, where both participants and readers will have a degree of political interest already - and we have ample chance to explain our meaning in plain English - we will more readily use such terms and try and reclaim them somewhat. That said, coining new terms can work too, although while you have no adverse meaning, you also have to create the positive meanings from scratch too. So while 'social stewardship' could be a useful term in the right context, there's no guarantee its meaning will remain untainted. If we're successful in any way, our enemies have a powerful mass media at their disposal and little interest in fairly and accurately representing our ideas, so any words used by a powerful workers movement, however 'pure' they start out will likely have their meanings distorted at some point. Such distortion is an occupational hazard of social change.

As an example, Murray Bookchin at one stage began using the word 'communitarianism' to describe his locally managed/federated vision of communism. Unfortunately this term also happens to be a central plank of the New Labour project, describing a situation where local funding is split between competing nationally/religious based 'community leaders'. In fact this usage predates Bookchin's, and it seems quite feasible that one of the three main parties or a think tank might claim 'social stewardship' to describe, for example, the offloading of critical local government services to charities (a quick google suggests the phrase already occupies the think tank lexicon). You're right to point out the problems with loaded jargon, and we don't tend to go around gleefully declaring

ourselves communists for this reason - at least without explaining ourselves - preferring instead to focus on the concrete things we advocate (self-organisation, direct action, solidarity, rank-and-file control of struggles through mass assemblies etc...). Such concrete propositions are harder to misunderstand or misrepresent, though they're not immune to the above processes either.

Self-management

I think our differences here are precisely that you have a specific vision of a kind of weighted-by-affectedness direct democracy, whereas we take a more pluralist view that there are many means to make decisions democratically, and what's best in one scenario may not be best in another. The problem with what you're suggesting is how to go about determining exactly how affected people are by a decision and weighting votes accordingly. This is a non-trivial task to say the least! Just consider what does 'affected' actually mean, objectively? Is someone who strongly objects to alcohol consumption more affected by a decision to open a bar than the future staff and patrons who could always serve or consume booze somewhere else? And what about unforeseen consequences where someone denied a say turns out to be massively affected?

Even if 'affectedness' can be quantified (no mean feat), the problem remains that weighting votes accordingly is non-trivial and explicitly involves disenfranchisement. This could easily undermine solidarity if people feel they've been denied a proper say – which they almost certainly will, it being impossible to please everyone. At least with one person, one vote direct democracy there's a sense amongst minorities that everyone's had their say and they may well be in the majority next time. But yes, this could be problematic if a decision really only affects a small sub-set of a council for example. This is why we're wary of being too prescriptive.

It may be that people who are not so affected by decisions tend to stay away from discussions and votes on them anyway, precisely because they're not affected by the outcome. If this was the case one-person, one-vote direct democracy may suffice much of the time as a sort of self-regulating weighting according to 'affectedness'. If it doesn't, more formal mechanisms may be needed. The idea of weighting according to 'affectedness' might be a possibility, but the not inconsiderable drawbacks listed above need to be taken into consideration. Our preference is for the simplest workable mechanisms, rather than prescribing incredibly complex weighted voting systems as the default.

Balanced job complexes

I think we are agreed on the principle that there should be no hierarchical division of labour and that any socially necessary menial tasks should be distributed in an egalitarian manner. We have some problems with the specific means advocated to achieve this – peer-ratings of effort/empowerment etc, which we think respectively are corrosive of solidarity, and take no account of the fact that one person might really

enjoy a task generally considered menial while others may despise a task considered empowering. However, as to the basic principle there seems to be agreement, certainly. I address the question of the 'abolition of work' more fully below under the discussion of 'remuneration for effort and sacrifice.' Needless to say if we are talking ultimate visions of a future society, we think any vision that does not propose the abolition of work is thoroughly unambitious! (So we are not misunderstood to be saying everyone will sit around all day playing guitars and singing kumbaya, this should be read in conjunction with the fuller explanation below).

Participatory planning – push or pull?

We do want there to be rational, social planning of production, but we do not believe this can work at the level of annual quotas. This is problematic even at the level of a single factory, let alone total global output. Production to quotas is what's known as 'push production' building to a plan and 'pushing' this output into stockpiles whether it is being consumed or not. This would also have the problem that there would be an incentive for productivity improvements to be kept in-firm so that quotas could be met – and income earned – more easily. The logic of exchange, however fair carries with it this kind of atomising tendency that works against solidarity. This point is developed below with relation to remuneration.

In contrast, we propose 'pull production', which means production is in response to consumption; as safety stocks are consumed this triggers production orders to replenish them, 'pulling' goods through the supply chain. As you note, this is not the invisible hand of the market, not least because there is no money, prices or exchange. Our criticism of central planning is not simply that it excludes the majority from input into the plan (although this criticism is correct, as far as it goes), but that the whole concept of rationally planning quotas for something as dynamic as a society of billions is fundamentally flawed, both practically and epistemologically.

Consequently, we see rational social planning taking place though the setting of priority sectors and goods/services, from essential through to luxury. The exact production volumes are then determined locally in response to consumption, with either/or allocation of resources determined by the relative priority of the industries, goods or services in question. In this way macro-order in terms of actual production volumes is emergent and not designed, although it will emerge according to the priorities of the socially decided plan (unlike the emergent order of markets, which simply reflects purchasing power and what it is profitable to produce, not what is needed, or the emergent order of biological evolution, which reflects nothing but reproductive fitness).

The means by which we think this process of social planning should happen are very similar to yours, by means of council structures with mandated, recallable or rotating boards/delegate councils dealing with resource allocation decisions according to the social plan's priorities. There may be other ways this could be done incorporating

technology (like everyone being able to access a database to update their individual preferences, automatically updating the social plan). However such a large-scale database would be unprecedented, and in any case there are probably benefits to face-to-face discussions in councils rather than atomised individual choices. We're open minded to better means, but a council structure seems a good point of departure.

Remunerating effort and sacrifice

You write "if you and I both have the same job at the same workplace and I work longer or harder than you then I get more credit for consumption. I think that this is a fair criteria for remuneration and if advocating such a criteria makes me a conservative then so be it – although I have to say that I don't recall any conservatives advocating remuneration for effort and sacrifice." I would beg to differ, for instance...

"The Conservatives understand that – as important as promoting equality is - fairness is about much more. It means ensuring fair rules, rewarding hard work and ensuring fair opportunities for all." [3]

The ideology of meritocracy is fundamentally conservative and goes against the practice of solidarity. It does this by individualizing people and pitting them against each other in 'fair' competition. Everyone gets what they deserve, every man for himself. You say you didn't really understand our criticisms - thanks for being honest about that rather than arguing at crossed purposes. This may reflect a lack of clarity on my part, or simply the unfamiliarity of libertarian communist ideas. Perhaps a bit of both. I'll try to clarify now.

The first problem is that 'effort and sacrifice' aren't valid measures for reward on account of people's different abilities - women being pregnant possibly, disabled people (nearly 10 million in the UK), ill people or temporarily injured people, etc. Not to mention normal stuff like some being stronger, taller, quick with numbers, etc. Now parecon attempts to address this by peer-effort ratings, everyone filling out a form of some kind on their workmates, rating how much effort people have put in despite their natural talents or disabilities. Aside from the fact this could make for an atmosphere of suspicion rather than solidarity, this introduces further problems of its own.

For instance how does one distinguish between a gifted slacker and a slightly dim grafter? People could also get more pay for less work by saying they are dyslexic for example, or dyspraxic. But how would you know if it was true? Do you give everyone mandatory medicals and psychological examinations? Psychometric testing? Remuneration for effort and sacrifice builds in incentives to lie and cheat, as individuals can better themselves by foul means as well as fair. The potential solutions to this (mandatory testing etc) just create another layer of unnecessary technocratic tasks more concerned with monitoring workers than meeting human needs.

But there is also a deeper problem. I would argue that parecon's fixation with measure (of effort, sacrifice, aptitudes, disabilities...) is itself a product of capitalist society; that is of a society ruled by value, by the drive to minimize socially necessary labour time (i.e. to constantly modernize, automate, impose a division of labour that reduces productive activity to repetitive work etc).

For those things which we enjoy most in life – friendship, love, play – the concept of measure is absurd or even obscene. Who would think to measure their friends, lovers or those they have a kick about with in the park on a scale of one to ten? Who would wish to be so measured? Economists perhaps, but the concept strikes us as absurd because the fixation with measure comes from the world of work, where time is money.

Instead of generalizing work, wage labour and measure 'fairly' across the whole of society, we seek the opposite movement; a generalization of human activity that is fulfilling in its own right, negating the need for the incentives or sanctions of a wage system. (The assumption such rewards and sanctions are necessary, nay, foundational aspects of a future society is what I mean by an 'economistic view of human beings.' It seems to presume Homo economicus, not people capable of producing collectively to meet their needs without wage incentives, and furthermore enjoying it too!).

This generalization of activity beyond measure is what we mean by the abolition of work and of the economy as a separate sphere of social life. The ultimate vision is to eliminate work as a separate category of human activity by making productive activity fulfilling in its own right. So for instance we'd use technology not just to increase productivity but to reduce effort, the working day etc, while production would be a more social affair and directly and transparently serve social needs. The abolition of work, not its democratization is the goal.

Furthermore a society that makes reward for effort and sacrifice a foundational principle provides no incentive to reduce effort and sacrifice. Much like today, workers would do well to keep labour-saving innovations to themselves in order to maximize their rewards (since they'd lose pay if they revealed they'd discovered a way to do the same tasks with less effort). For instance, if I did X tasks and it earned me Y credit for living, I wouldn't want to see my standard of living drop merely because I (or someone else) had invented a new way of doing the task more easily. By contrast, we would see the reduction of effort and sacrifice, alongside ecological sustainability as the driving forces of development under libertarian communism (i.e. concrete manifestations of 'need' in the maxim 'from each according to ability...').

A century ago the sociologist Max Weber argued that the protestant work ethic of effort and sacrifice represented 'the spirit of capitalism.' We can see this spirit reflected in the meritocratic ideology of most mainstream politicians (like the Conservatives quoted above), and in the founding myth of American capitalism, the dream of rags to riches

opportunity. Unfortunately, this spirit also seems to animate parecon. Instead of seeking the abolition of the working class, it seeks its generalization. It seeks the emancipation of the spirit of capitalism from the limits imposed on it by capitalist society: generalized wage labour for all, but where effort and sacrifice will be fairly rewarded in a way impossible under capitalism as we know it. An American dream for the post-Seattle generation.

[1] Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community - <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james>

[2] Newswire: www.libcom.org/news - Tea Break: <http://libcom.org/tags/tea-break>

[3] 'An Unfair Britain', the Conservative Party (2008), <http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Unfair%20Britain.ashx?dl=tr>

Debating anti-capitalist vision...

Just what is wrong with the economy? And what do we propose in its place? What would our ideal society look like, and how might we realise it? Can ends be separated from means? What is class and how does it relate to issues of gender and race? This debate between the Project for a Participatory Society and the libcom.org group discusses all these crucial questions and more.

Social ownership, self-management, balanced job complexes, participatory planning, remunerating effort and sacrifice. Individually these features represent alternatives to every major institutional feature of capitalism. Together they represent an alternative economic system to capitalism.

Mark Evans, Project for a Participatory Society

For those things which we enjoy most in life – friendship, love, play – the concept of measure is absurd or even obscene. (...) Instead of generalizing work, wage labour and measure 'fairly' across the whole of society, we seek the opposite movement; a generalization of human activity that is fulfilling in its own right, negating the need for the incentives or sanctions of a wage system.

Joseph Kay, libcom.org group