

How do we solve the world's problems?

The material situation – calamity on every front?

Co-caused and mutually deepening, conjoined and culminating issues

Today we face severe dangerous and threatening situations in a range of areas – the environment and ecology, with climate change, pollution, depletion of natural resources; energy, with the crossing of the oil peak¹; war and terror, renewed imperialism and militarism; poverty, food and water crises, and preventable disease. These areas inter-relate and link. The energy crunch is perhaps a leading cause of the war in the Middle East²; environmental impacts such as resource shortages will exacerbate poverty and food and water conflicts³.

They threaten to deepen, mutually contribute and culminate, and would seem to require urgent action - if only we knew what. What can we do about them? Can we do anything? The answer, seemingly, de facto, is no. Solutions are talked about, but the situations remain and increase.

To begin to approach the issues, we need to understand their causation.

The causation – indictment of capitalism

Works monolithically against its contexts in society, ecology, political emancipation; works against solutions

So let me present my diagnosis. The issues share causation: the complex of corporatism, capitalism, consumerism which constitutes the world system of globalisation, demands economic growth, ever greater consumption, and therefore the depredation and despoliation of the ecology⁴. It gives rise to exponential curves in resource usage, emissions, population, coming into contact with finite contexts. The system is therefore predicated on behaviour which runs against the health of its “contexts” – human society, the ecology.

Powerful carbon producing or dependent companies agitate against action on climate change. The incorporation of developing countries into the system of world finance and trade, under unfair terms and under economic blackmail and debt leverage, causes and perpetuates conditions of poverty, for the benefit of the same corporations. Corporations frequently hold sway in determining policy, outweighing other stakeholders. Some leading US military corporations agitated for and benefit from the War on Terror⁵.

Neoliberalism in particular, comprising a policy package of deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation, the ascendance of business and finance and the exigency of global competitiveness, with a lifetime of c1973-

¹ Peak oil – the concept that we're reaching the halfway point of total world oil supplies, with the remaining half becoming exponentially more difficult to extract.

² “Iraq and the Problem of Peak Oil”, F. William Engdahl, 31/05/04. <http://www.energybulletin.net/node/428>

³ The Impact of Climate Change on Human Security by Saleemul Huq and Catherine Pettengell http://www.bridge-mag.com/magazine/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=519&Itemid=31&limit=1&limitstart=0

⁴ See for instance Paul Hawken, *Natural Capitalism*, Back Bay Books, 1999.

⁵ As described by Naomi Klein in her recent book *The Shock Doctrine*, Penguin, 2008.

c2008 (and currently being rebooted?), has exacerbated the issues and forestalled attempts to address them. Neoliberalism has been the context in which the interests of corporations and financial profit have been favoured over those of other stakeholders, such as nature and the commonweal.

We can characterise neoliberalism as reducing democracy, and therefore the access of the interests democracy can carry – including labour, ecology, spirituality – for the advantage of private profit. These trends have been associated with the dominance of the free market, in the last thirty years, which has consecrated power to the market, to technocrats; and unified all political parties e.g. in the UK around a neoliberal consensus.

Neoliberalism works against democracy because the interests of affected populations and of the environment are not reflected; their access is reduced. Examples of this: world trade agreements (which developing country producers become beholden to as a result of trade liberalisation) are conducted between unelected representatives, and real decision-making power concentrated in closed green room meetings of the Quint powers⁶. Therefore the producers who are affected by the decisions do not have any access to policymaking.

The current period has seen increasing inequality. In the leading economy, the USA, GDP has risen over the past thirty years but incomes for working Americans remained stagnant, while the share in income of the very richest has increased dramatically⁷.

Neoliberalism is the most recent, necessary, successful eventuation of the system of capitalism; we can trace the causing factors further back and deeper though, through capitalism itself, to the latter's fundamental dynamics (production for exchange, under conditions of competition). So addressing neoliberalism is not enough – undoing it to recreate a managed capitalism will not, I submit, prevent the causing of the issues. The issues are created and exacerbated in a secular fashion through the periodic swinging of the pendulum between liberalised and regulated capitalism.

So, faced with these worsening issues, what can we do? If they are caused by the mitigation and diminution of democracy, we can adopt as our banner, working in the opposite direction, the development of democracy.

The solutions offered within the mainstream, do not address the issues – they leave its patterning logic intact. We can witness this failure, for example on climate change, with the ineffectiveness of Kyoto, and other emissions targets – the UK aimed at a 20% reduction in emissions by 2010, from 1990, and instead emissions are increasing⁸. Further they (e.g. carbon trading, NGO initiatives) are non- or anti-democratic – they already accept the diminution of political access which is the facilitator of the production of the issues.

The solution: democracy

An alternative both to capitalism and to previous alternatives to it – a development never yet achieved

⁶ “The 'green room' syndrome”, Al-Ahram Weekly, 21/11/02. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/613/in4.htm>

⁷ See for instance, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁸ “UK greenhouse emissions show rise”, BBC News, 29/03/2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6506223.stm>

We can argue that greater democracy leads to the better representation of these interests. The environment will be better stewarded if decisions affecting it are made in the public domain, rather than allowing private profit interests to pursue their interests and influence policy, unhindered.

So, we can posit, the solution is more democracy. Though we putatively have a democracy, we have a representative democracy rather than a participative democracy – the evolution of democracy is incomplete. We will treat democracy as a scale rather than a nametag, and assess existing and prospective arrangements in terms of how much they meet it - so democracy becomes the yardstick for critique of the status quo, and of alternatives to it.

Genuine democracy might seem to be an impossible ideal. Perhaps it is, but surely we should attempt it. We would be attempting to go beyond what we have achieved before; to go beyond the twentieth century polarities of capitalism and communism, to evolve them both in favour of and in the direction of democracy.

We have now, arguably for the first time, with the technological gains of the scientific revolution, the material means to afford, and, following the Enlightenment and subsequently, the political and philosophical experience and values, to be able to achieve, a real democracy.

What we see instead are the reverse tendencies manifesting themselves (viz the US National Intelligence Committee's projections of a global nightmare by 2020 of resource wars, borders, terrorism and repression⁹; and the evolving surveillance society), while we kid ourselves that we already have such a democracy, that we're already there. Liberalism has always had a Janus face – rhetoric of universalism, going alongside imperialism and exploitation¹⁰ – we need now, because of the ecological crisis, urgently, to evolve it by appeal to its stated values, and to make them actual.

Subjective aspects of our predicament

Further indictment of the system; further explanation, through personal disempowerment, of the causation of the issue.

Subjectivity in contradistinction, as the site, of our potential emancipation through understanding, for now just theoretically, the possibility of solutions conferred by alternatives.

A characteristic result of neoliberalism is the reduction of our objective political access – through factors such as the passing of control to the market, to technocrats, the consensus around neoliberal policies among different parties, because progressive liberalisation becomes objectively the only game in town.

This has a subjective counterpart. It is experienced subjectively – for example as a feeling that politics is futile; or that it is a corrupt, noisy, superficial game. We have a sense of reduced agency. We feel we can't do anything about the issues which confront us, which we read about, or experience in our own lives.

⁹ "Whose future is this anyway?", TomDispatch 17/01/2005

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/2131/whose_future_is_this_anyway

¹⁰ As described in, for instance, Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder*, Verso, 2008. Review here:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-liberal-defence-of-murder-by-richard-seymour-1649105.html>

This in turn becomes objective, becomes self-fulfilling. The feeling that this is the case turns into the reality.

But a historical reading of the conjuncture, allows us to periodise this reduction: it feels like politics is futile, because it actually is – but only for specific historical political reasons – and the undoing of this is precisely through politics (through increasing democracy); the reward for undoing which is again the benefits of democracy in terms of the interests of the contexts – the environment, social welfare – better being able to be represented.

As well as this explicitly political inference, there is an experiential aspect. A lot of our experience is structured by the fact and circumstances of a priori political defeat, and this isn't experienced as a political issue, precisely *because* of that political defeat, and because the way the defeat is structured is through de-politicisation.

For example, we have the sense that gratification is to be had not in political action, but in consumption (as we are told in consumer messages, we should consume, passively, superficial gratification).

Again, a historical political understanding is the answer to this – to understanding its provenance, how we can combat it, how there can be another way.

The system affronts our subjectivity, while seemingly tending to it: with our awareness of the ills caused by the system we live and work in; with the diminishment of solidarity, sociality and epistemological awareness and consciousness; atomisation; with the sheer impersonality and instrumentality of the system, its callousness; with the dull compulsion of wage labour; competition in interpersonal relations; all are aspects of experience of modern life which are difficult to deal with.

Simultaneously, our subjectivity is ostensibly tended to – beguiled in advertising, etc – mollifying us with proximate power, even if just power to satiate our desires – all of which would maintain us in partialised reduction. Subjectivity is tended to and negated at the same time.

Working against a sense of empowered agency, further, is the impossible awareness of our connection to the issues – impossible truly to process, to deal with. The connection and the separation both are products of neoliberalism. It's our own actions which are bound up in the production of the ill effects – however this is to be understood systemically rather than personally culpably in a way which can just lead to defensive rejection.

What we really need to understand is that it is our system, our actions, our status quo, which are at fault, which are creating the issues. This is difficult to bear because what we're involved in, is a negation of the self, but/and it is also and therefore subjective evolution – growth.

Because there's "nowhere to go" for the awareness of the deleterious effects, this further dumbfounds, disempowers and demotivates us.

Those who could theoretically address the issues (e.g., if we take the numerous ill effects caused by northern

governments' policies, such as developing world poverty, climate change: the electorates of northern countries) lack the direct awareness of them, while those who are implacably faced with them, don't have the means to address them.

Given all this, what can we do to address the situation? Having delineated the issues created, and indicted the system which creates them, what are we then to do?

Seemingly, the global ill effects, the indictment of the system which causes them, and the non-solutions available within it, tell us we need alternatives. Each of these is a point of witnessing, a site of resistance, and therefore potentially at least, subjectively gaining traction. Meanwhile, we have to be aware that alternatives are possible before examining the issues and the indictment. If we examine the charge sheet, believing an alternative (or any solution) isn't possible, it's just an exercise in depressing futility.

Those ill effects, and the systemic indictment, can then be examined in their full force, to their full extent, and be allowed to give rise to their natural result - motivation to do something about the issues. If we have a sense that solutions and alternatives exist, our motivation can be allowed to manifest, otherwise it disappears.

Our subjectivity is the place where we can at least create the possibility for a change to occur, as an act of faith initially (reversing self-fulfilling disempowerment and defeat). This is where a perception of capability, and motivation, can eventuate.

So through a clear-sighted reading of those ill effects, the systemic indictment, the possibility of alternatives, and of the role of our subjectivity in either being the site of a change and a solution, or facilitating the ongoing perpetuation and recausing of the issues – we can regain agency within the subject. We create subjective motivation and capability, in counterposition to the profitable subjective values of defeat and passivity, instrumentalisation. By performing this motion of constituting an active response, subjectively, we are already presenting an alternative to the system – we are already working contra its direction.

This helps explain why our subjectivity – our attitudes, perceptions, values - is such contested terrain, with ideological apparatus and experience mutually reinforcing and attempting to get us to remain wedded to the status quo.

Then, when we further understand that the yardstick of the alternative, as well as indictment of the status quo, is the arbiter of democracy, which is self-willed by the people, we understand that capability is provided by motivation, and this feeds further motivation.

So to sum up so far: objectively, the response is more democracy; subjectively: initially bearing witness to the situation we are in, and its causation, even if at first we don't know what the solution is. And then exploring alternatives.

We can posit that this subjective and objective would feed into each other in a virtuous cycle – the experience of creating democracy would allow greater subjective consciousness of our agency and ability to create better

outcomes – and vice versa.

Alternatives - let's have the discussion

Discussion of alternatives is closed down, for ideological and material interest reasons, thereby closing down discussion of the system and its ill effects; but these latter necessitate that we have the discussion.

How all this – an awareness of the system's ill effects – our subjective motivation – could be consequential is where alternatives come in (carried by democracy). An alternative is wanted, and needed, but forestalled.

However, while there are factors suggesting that an alternative, rather than a solution within the system, is what is needed, there are also powerful factors negating, in an a priori way, the endeavour of examining an alternative, *which must in turn be rejected a priori to clear the space for examining an alternative*, even if we later decide an alternative is not needed.

This includes the following memes among others: (with counteracting argument for each)

There is no alternative.

Capitalism is the best system. The historical alternatives – 20c communism etc – were ruinous.

This is a key argument, which (too) often ends discussions.

We can contest the idea that actually existing alternatives have always been ruinous – look at the nascent pink revolution democracies in Latin America for positive examples of actually-existing socialism¹¹.

But even accepting the point, alternatives do not have to be, indeed couldn't plausibly be, confined to the ideas and agendas of 20c communism. We are looking to produce an alternative to capitalism which is also an alternative to totalitarian communism – democracy.

We accept the gains – technological, and in terms of values – brought by capitalism – which have been universal in rhetoric but only ever partial in practice – and we affirm the need to make them general.

Unless we say that human beings are incapable of transcending capitalism – that any idealistic alternative is doomed – which given the oncoming crisis, implies considerable pessimism about our destiny; and also entails a totalising perception, which apologists for capitalism seem to project onto alternatives - then we shouldn't accept defeat in this way.

This is rich terrain for discussion – could an alternative be better than the status quo? How do we get there? Can a move to an alternative avoid the crash back to earth met by utopianism; can it avoid terror and totalitarianism which seems sometimes to follow revolutions?

These are all worthy questions for debate – what we cannot have, any more, given the extent of the ills, is for

¹¹ See Patrick Barrett, Daniel Chavez and César Rodríguez-Garavito, *The New Latin American Left*, Pluto Press, 2008.

the discussion of alternatives, let alone of the ills and the indictment of the system that causes them, to be closed down for the idea that there is no alternative, or that alternatives are automatically worse.

The status quo – capitalism – is “natural”.

In two main senses:

- that it reflects human nature
- that it has won out in the end, “naturally” - reflecting the culmination of society’s progress, its breaking free of fetters of feudalism (and indeed 20c communism), etc.

For the first, it's very easy to argue that instead society shapes human nature. So our perception of what human nature is, is conditioned by our own experience within capitalism. Human nature isn't transhistorical. In other societies, it has been different. The benefit-maximising individual is a relatively recent arrival – for instance in hunterer gatherer societies we have been indivisible parts of a cooperative social unit¹².

For the second – neoliberalism eventuated and seemed hegemonic everywhere until recently, but, far from this being a culmination of liberation, arising from the progressive freeing of society from its fetters, it was imposed by force, by specific protagonists in a conscious and often violent pursuit of their rational interests.

Capitalism will lead to increasing prosperity.

The rising tide will lift all boats. Though society might be marked by inequality, by reducing the burden of social programmes and other redistribution on capital, we encourage investment and economic growth, and through the trickledown effect, there will be a general benefit.

Always an argument which benefited the minority wealthy, this finds itself largely discredited empirically today. Instead what we see is greater inequality combined with the removal of the safety net, with predictable results – increasing misery for an increasing number.

The textual ideology supporting the system would not be so powerful were it not for its reinforcement in our lived experience through the sheer fact and presence of its existence. We have to be conscious of the ways in which these tacit stakes in the system, absolutely inescapable, can play into support for one or more of the ideological positions above. What we get to when we take away the effect of those stakes, theoretically, is something closer to an objective, dispassionate perception of the system.

For example, we get our pay from the system. We get the fulfilment of our needs and desires (material, social, psychological, etc – created and natural – determined by the system and fulfilled by it).

Relative power – economic and political, social and psychological – is procured within the system, rather than in opposition to it. In one sense it's rational to participate; although, globally, it's irrational.

Furthermore, there is a multitude of factors – adverts, the media, example of peers – influencing us to join in

¹² See Marshall Sahlins, *The Original Affluent Society* - <http://www.primitivism.com/original-affluent.htm>

rather than take a position of distance.

In order to transcend these, we use our free minds and will, to bracket them, in order to examine other aspects of our material situation connected with the ill effects of the situation. Going from proximate to global rationality; tending to our societal as well as personal ecology. We can also use Kant's distinction between public and private duty – the former being to tend to one's occupation within society – the latter to be involved in improving society, even if this means acting contrary to the powers that be and prevailing interests¹³.

Alternatives – mutual coevolution

A leap of faith, to gain the world

The extent of the crisis we are in, and its systemic causation, urge that we look at alternatives.

The necessity of alternatives, and the power of the status quo, in its material existence and hegemony, creates a yawning chasm for the subject, for the individual. Global ethics and rationality demand we cross it – that we embrace an alternative which takes better care of the planet. Meanwhile personal ethics and rationality, often demand in contrast that we don't – that we cleave to the proximate pay-off, in order to secure our material well-being (although this proximate material and social, psychological, even epistemological fulfilment and power, is procured at the expense of all the ills created as a result of the system, with all the existential and psychological harm which this entails (frequently denied or projected, ruinously).

It's a start just to witness this – using our aspect of private duty, as above. Perhaps more of us feel this way than we suspect and we can all move together, in a mutual social evolution and sublation which we create as we go along.

The prize for crossing the gulf to alternatives, is impossible to overstate: potentially, a solution to the issues; living a life in society that doesn't contradict our ethical principles. That our social values could actually be globally, and not just partially, contradictorily, enacted and consequential. And further, that by adapting to become sustainable, our society could survive and not face the disaster of a general breakdown because of ecological crisis and resource crunch.

Alternatives – practical considerations

Having created the space for alternatives, in what will they consist, and how do we get to them?

Seeing now that alternatives are possible and necessary, diverse and open, what shall we build?

We have advocated democracy as the yardstick; integration with the contexts is the object.

The way, materially, and socially, to constitute a path to the alternative is, evidently enough, outside or in opposition to the system.

¹³ Described in Dan Hind, *The Threat to Reason*, Verso, 2007.

Practically, through the building of (the) social movement(s) – a movement which can carry democratic hopes and instantiate democratic organisation; which can include diverse people united around the building of another way. The World Social Forum is an example of this.

Further we can build practical initiatives – to give us experience, skills, relationships and sources of subsistence and livelihood which are outside the system. Such as permaculture projects, sustainable agriculture, LETS schemes, etc.

And we can work oppositionally to take back our democratic access within the system, and militating against the obstacles we encounter in so doing – for example militating against corporate lobbying, against unfair international trade agreements – the gamut of single issue NGO demands – but link them up.

What we won't, and can't have, is a fully fledged alternative – the roadmap is uncharted. We are involved in creating something which has never been created before – and yet, far from being a frail objective, the need and therefore the motivation to do this are continually resupplied, in the ills and in the contradictions wrought by the system; and the conceptual possibilities for identification and for constructing an alternative also, in the working class, in the ecology, etc. the yardstick is this integration, ethical and practical.

We have to deal also with the weaknesses of the actually existing alternative – especially in the US and the UK. The gulf the individual faces is also present here, in attempting to produce a solution or an alternative: between action within the system, which allows a feeling of personal consequence (e.g. working for an NGO), while leaving the patterning of the issues intact; or action in contradistinction, which offers the paltry choice of joining a potentially totalitarian party on the far left, or isolation.

There is a terrible gulf between what's needed, in terms of an alternative, and what we have. We need to see that this very fact itself is structured, determined by the field of operation of capitalism – generating partialism, reduced perspective, and apathy. Therefore our consciousness is our site of resistance.

In the Alternatives Project, I'll be looking at initiatives which function as the buds of alternatives – in every domain – political, economic, social and ecological – which show us that an alternative, as well as being necessary, is possible.