

Conflictividad Social y Política en el capitalismo contemporáneo.
Antagonismos y resistencias (I)



número 35 (primer semestre 2017) - number 35 (first semester 2017)

Conflictividad social: categorías, concepciones y debate

Revista THEOMAI/ THEOMAI Journal
Estudios críticos sobre Sociedad y Desarrollo / Critical Studies about Society and Development

How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century¹

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We live in a world where capitalism, as a system of class relations and economic dynamics, creates enormous harms in the lives of people. The list of such harms is familiar: poverty and precariousness in the midst of plenty; concentrations of power and wealth that undermine democracy; a culture of intense competition and individualism that undermines community and solidarity; forms of domination within work that violate ideals of individual self-

¹ This article draws on a previous essay "How to Be an Anticapitalist Today", published in *Jacobin*, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/erik-olin-wright-real-utopias-anticapitalism-democracy>

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determination; imperatives of profit-making, consumerism and growth that propel us towards environmental disaster; and on and on.³ While there is widespread recognition of these problems, nevertheless the idea of a viable alternative to capitalism that would avoid these harms and make life genuinely better seems quite far-fetched to most people. In part the issue is simply skepticism that an alternative – even if it can be imagined – would actually work in practice. But even among people who do believe in the viability and desirability of a democratic, egalitarian, solidaristic alternative to capitalism, there is little confidence that an emancipatory alternative to capitalism is politically achievable.⁴ The problem here is not mainly the ability to imagine the goal of an emancipatory social transformation; the problem is imagining a strategy to realize that goal – how to get from here to there.

Of course, there is no inherent reason why for every desirable social goal there is a plausible strategy. This is an especially acute issue where the goal is the radical transformation of the basic structure of a social system. It is one thing to envision improvements in particular institutional settings, and quite another to want to refashion the foundations of a social order. It may simply be impossible to have a coherent strategy for the emancipatory transformation of something as complex as capitalism as a socioeconomic system. This is what Frederick Hayek claimed in his strident attack on socialism, *The Fatal Conceit*.⁵ Intellectuals, he argued, believed in the fantasy that they could imagine a radical alternative to the existing social system and bring it about through deliberate political action. This was a fantasy because the negative unintended consequences of such massive social engineering inevitably would overwhelm the intended outcomes.⁶ If Hayek is right, the answer to the question “What is to be Done?” to create a democratic, egalitarian alternative to capitalism is “nothing.”

Hayek’s criticism should not be dismissed out of hand simply because he used it in defense of conservative political positions. Any project of deep social change has to worry about unintended consequences. And yet, it remains the case that capitalism is immensely destructive, obstructing the prospects for broad human flourishing. What we need is an understanding of anti-capitalist strategies that avoids both the false optimism of wishful thinking and the disabling pessimism that emancipatory social transformation is beyond strategic reach. Clarifying this possibility is the objective of this essay.

Four Strategies

Four strategic logics have historically been particularly important in anti-capitalist struggles: *smashing*, *taming*, *resisting*, and *escaping*. Even though in practice these strategies intermingle, each of them constitutes a distinct way of responding to the harms of capitalism. We will begin by examining each of these in turn and then look at various ways in which they can be combined. I will then argue that a particular way of combining these strategies – which I will

³ For an extended discussion of the harms of capitalism that underlies the analysis here, see Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning real Utopias* (Verso, 2010), chapter 3.

⁴ Any proposal for social transformation must satisfy three criteria: *desirability*, *viability*, and *achievability*. A desirable alternative to the world as it is may be perfectly viable – it would work if you could get there – but unachievable because the power of elites that oppose the alternative create insurmountable obstacles. The interconnection of these criteria is discussed in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 20-25.

⁵ Frederick Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit* (London: Routledge: 1988).

⁶ Hayek’s argument can be summed up in what might be termed Hayek’s two laws of unintended consequences: 1. The negative unintended effects of deliberate attempts at social change are generally greater than the positive unintended effects. 2. The bigger the deliberately engineered social change, the bigger the negative unintended consequences. Taken together this predicts that strategic attempts at the transformation of the foundations of a social system will produce social disasters.

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refer to as *eroding capitalism* – offers the most plausible strategic vision for transcending capitalism in the 21st century.

Smashing

This is the classic strategic logic of revolutionaries. The rationale goes something like this:

The system is rotten. All efforts to make life tolerable within capitalism will eventually fail. From time to time small reforms that improve the lives of people may be possible when popular forces are strong, but such improvements will always be fragile, vulnerable to attack and reversible. Ultimately it is an illusion that capitalism can be rendered a benign social order in which ordinary people can live flourishing, meaningful lives. At its core, capitalism is unreformable. The only hope is to destroy it, sweep away the rubble and then build an alternative. As the closing words of the early twentieth century song *Solidarity Forever* proclaim, “We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.” The full realization of the emancipatory alternative may be gradual, but the necessary condition for such a gradual transition is a ruptural break in the existing system of power.

But how to do this? How is it possible for anti-capitalist forces to amass sufficient power to destroy capitalism and replace it with a better alternative? This is indeed a daunting task, for the power of dominant classes that makes reform an illusion also blocks the revolutionary goal of a rupture in the system. Anti-capitalist revolutionary theory, informed by the writings of Marx and extended by Lenin, Gramsci and others, offered an attractive argument about how this could take place:

While it is true that much of the time capitalism seems unassailable, it is also a deeply contradictory system, prone to disruptions and crises. Sometimes those crises reach an intensity which makes the system as a whole fragile, vulnerable to challenge. In the strongest versions of the theory, there are even underlying tendencies in the “laws of motion” of capitalism for the intensity of such system-weakening crises to increase over time, so that in the long-term capitalism becomes unsustainable; it destroys its own conditions of existence. But even if there is no systematic tendency for crises to become ever-worse, what can be predicted is that periodically there will be intense capitalist economic crises in which the system becomes vulnerable and ruptures become possible. The problem for a revolutionary party, therefore, is to be in a position to take advantage of the opportunity created by such system-level crises to lead a mass mobilization to seize state power, either through elections or through an insurrectionary overthrow of the existing regime. Once in control of the state, the first task is to rapidly refashion the state itself to make it a suitable weapon of ruptural transformation, and then use that power to repress the opposition of the dominant classes and their allies, dismantle the pivotal power structures of capitalism, and build the necessary institutions for the long-term development of an alternative economic system.

In the 20th century, various versions of this general line of reasoning animated the imagination of revolutionaries around the world. Revolutionary Marxism infused struggles with hope and optimism, for it not only provided a potent indictment of the world as it

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existed, but also provided a plausible scenario for how an emancipatory alternative could be realized. This gave people courage, sustaining the belief that they were on the side of history and that the enormous commitment and sacrifices they were called on to make in their struggles against capitalism had real prospects of eventually succeeding. And sometimes, if rarely, such struggles did culminate in the revolutionary seizure of state power.

The results of such revolutionary seizures of power, however, were never the creation of a democratic, egalitarian, emancipatory alternative to capitalism. While revolutions in the name of socialism and communism did demonstrate that it was possible “to build a new world from the ashes of the old,” and in certain specific ways they may have improved the material conditions of life of most people for a period of time, the evidence of the heroic attempts at rupture in the 20th century is that they do not produce the kind of new world envisioned in revolutionary ideology. It is one thing to burn down old institutions and social structures; it is quite another to build emancipatory new institutions from the ashes.

Why the revolutions of the 20th century never resulted in robust, sustainable human emancipation is, of course, a hotly debated matter. Some people argue that this was just because of the historically specific, unfavorable circumstances of the attempts at system-wide ruptures. Revolutions occurred in economically backward societies, surrounded by powerful enemies. Some argue it was because of strategic errors of the leadership of those revolutions. Others indict the motives of leadership: the leaders that triumphed in the course of these revolutions were motivated by desires for status and power rather than the empowerment and wellbeing of the masses. And still others argue that failure is intrinsic to any attempt at radical rupture in a social system. There are too many moving parts, too much complexity and too many unintended consequences. As a result, attempts at system-rupture will inevitably tend to unravel into such chaos that revolutionary elites, regardless of their motives, will be compelled to resort to pervasive violence and repression to sustain social order. Such violence, in turn, destroys the possibility for a genuinely democratic, participatory process of building a new society.

Regardless of which (if any) of these explanations are correct, the evidence from the revolutionary tragedies of the 20th century is that *system-level* rupture doesn't work as a strategy for social emancipation.⁷ This doesn't imply rejecting the idea of an emancipatory alternative to capitalism, organized around qualitatively different principles, as the fundamental goal of social transformation; what it calls into question is the plausibility of a strategy that attempts to destroy in a ruptural manner the dominance of capitalism.⁸ Nevertheless, the idea of a revolutionary rupture with capitalism has not completely disappeared. Even if it no longer constitutes a coherent strategy of any significant political force, it speaks to the frustration and anger of living in a world of such sharp inequalities and unrealized potentials for human flourishing, and in a political system that seems increasingly undemocratic and unresponsive. If, however, one wants to actually transform capitalism in an emancipatory direction, visions that resonate with anger are not enough; what is needed is a strategic logic that has some chance of working in practice.

⁷ The issue here is the possibility of a ruptural break in the fundamental structures of a socio-economic system. Ruptural breaks with particular institutional arrangements and policies, of course, can still be part of an overall strategy of transformation. It is one thing to have a revolution that overthrows an authoritarian political regime and quite another to try to rapidly dismantle the foundations of capitalism as an economic system.

⁸ In a sense, therefore, the goal remains ruptural – a qualitatively different kind of socioeconomic system – but the strategy for achieving this is not.

Taming capitalism

The major alternative to the idea of a revolutionary rupture with capitalism in the 20th century was *taming capitalism* through reform. This is the central idea behind the anti-capitalist currents within the left of social democratic parties and non-revolutionary socialist parties.⁹ Here is the basic argument:

Capitalism, when left to its own devices, creates great harms. It generates levels of inequality that are destructive to social cohesion; it destroys traditional jobs and leaves people to fend for themselves; it creates uncertainty and risk in the lives of individuals and whole communities; it harms the environment. These are all consequences of the inherent dynamics of a capitalist economy. Nevertheless, it is possible to build counteracting institutions capable of significantly neutralizing these harms. Capitalism does not need to be left to its own devices; it can be tamed by well-crafted state policies. To be sure, this may involve sharp struggles since it involves reducing the autonomy and power of the capitalist class, and there are no guarantees of success in such struggles. The capitalist class and its political allies will claim that the regulations and redistribution designed to neutralize these “alleged” harms of capitalism will destroy its dynamism, cripple competitiveness, and undermine incentives. Such arguments, however, are simply self-serving rationalizations for privilege and power. Capitalism can be subjected to significant regulation and redistribution to counteract its harms and still provide adequate profits for it to function. To accomplish this requires popular mobilization and political will; one can never rely on the enlightened benevolence of elites. But in the right circumstances, it is possible to win these battles and impose the constraints needed for a more benign form of capitalism. The result is capitalism with significantly modified rules of the game.

The idea of taming capitalism does not eliminate the underlying tendency for capitalism to generate harms; it simply counteracts their effects. This is like a medicine which effectively deals with symptoms rather than with the underlying causes of a health problem. Sometimes that is good enough. Parents of newborn babies are often sleep-deprived and prone to headaches. One solution is to take an aspirin and cope; another is to get rid of the baby. Sometimes neutralizing the symptom is better than trying to get rid of the underlying cause.

Of course, not every reform of the rules governing capitalism, even those that are intended to neutralize some of the harms of capitalism, can be thought of as anti-capitalist. Banking regulation that is designed to prevent insider trading or system-disrupting speculative risk-taking are better thought of as simply helping to stabilize capitalism, protecting capitalism from its own internal self-destructive tendencies. Or regulation of fishing to prevent the collapse of fishing stocks simply solves a collective action problem faced by large-scale capitalist fishing. Anti-capitalist reforms are reforms that introduce in one way or another egalitarian, democratic and solidaristic values and principles into the operation of

⁹ In recent decades, the terms “social democracy” and even “socialist” have, in some places, lost their anti-capitalist connotations as a result of the embrace of significant elements of the neoliberal agenda by some social democratic and socialist parties. I am using the term social democracy in the traditional sense of a political orientation that recognizes the systemic harms of capitalism and seeks to ameliorate them through interventions by the state promoting equality, democracy and solidarity.

capitalism. Such reforms may also help stabilize capitalism – indeed, this is partially what makes them possible – but they do so in ways which also make capitalism less capitalistic.¹⁰

In what is sometimes called the “Golden Age of Capitalism” – roughly the three decades following World War II – social democratic policies, especially in those places where they were most thoroughly implemented, did a fairly good job at moving in the direction of a more humane economic system. More specifically, three clusters of state policies created new rules in which capitalism operated in ways that counteracted the harms of capitalism and, to a variable degree, embodied egalitarian, democratic and solidaristic values:

1. Some of the most serious risks people experience in their lives – especially around health, employment, and income – were reduced through a fairly comprehensive system of publicly mandated and funded social insurance.
2. The state assumed responsibility for the provision of an expansive set of public goods paid for through a robust system of relatively high taxation. These public goods included basic and higher education, vocational skill formation, public transportation, cultural activities, recreational facilities, research and development. Some of these mostly benefited capitalists, but many provided for broad benefits for people in general.
3. The state also created a regulatory regime designed to deal with the most serious negative externalities of the behavior of investors and firms in capitalist markets: pollution, product and workplace hazards, predatory market behavior, asset market volatility, etc. Again, some of these regulations were strictly in the service of the interests of capitalists, but some also protected the welfare of workers and the broader population.

These policies did not mean that the economy ceased to be capitalist: capitalists were still basically left free to allocate capital on the basis of profit-making opportunities in the market, and aside from taxes, they appropriated the profits generated by those investments to use as they wished. What had changed was that the state took responsibility for correcting the three principle failures of capitalist markets: individual vulnerability to risks, under-provision of public goods, and negative externalities of private profit-maximizing economic activity. The result was a reasonably well-functioning form of capitalism with muted inequalities and muted conflicts. Capitalists may not have preferred this, but it worked well enough. Capitalism had, at least partially, been tamed. Capitalism continued to exist, but in certain critical ways it was a less capitalistic form of capitalism.

That was the Golden Age. The world in the first decades of the 21st century looks very different. Everywhere, even in the strongholds of social democracy in Northern Europe, there have been calls for rollbacks of the “entitlements” connected to social insurance, reductions of taxes and the associated provision of public goods, deregulation of many aspects of capitalist production and markets, and the privatization of many state services. Taken as a whole, these transformations go under the name of “neoliberalism.”

A variety of forces have contributed to this reduction of the willingness and apparent capacity of the state to neutralize the harms of capitalism. The globalization of capitalism has made it much easier for capitalist firms to move investments to places in the world with less regulation and cheaper labor. The threat of such movement of capital, along with a variety of technological and demographic changes, has fragmented and weakened the labor movement, making it less capable of resistance and political mobilization. Combined with globalization, the financialization of capital has led to massive increases in wealth and income inequality,

¹⁰ This is similar to the idea of “non-reformist reforms” put forward by André Gorz in *A Strategy for Labor* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1967).

which in turn has increased the political leverage of opponents of the social democratic state. Instead of being tamed, capitalism has been unleashed.

Perhaps the three decades or so of the Golden Age were just an historical anomaly, a brief period in which favorable structural conditions and robust popular power opened up the possibility for the relatively egalitarian, social democratic model. Before that time capitalism was a rapacious system, and under neoliberalism it has become rapacious once again, returning to the normal state of affairs for capitalist systems. Perhaps in the long run capitalism is not tamable. Defenders of the idea of revolutionary ruptures with capitalism have always claimed that taming capitalism was an illusion, a diversion from the task of building a political movement to overthrow capitalism.

But perhaps things are not so dire. The claim that globalization imposes powerful constraints on the capacity of states to raise taxes, regulate capitalism and redistribute income is a politically effective claim in part because people believe it, not because the constraints are actually that narrow. In politics, the limits of possibility are always in part created by beliefs in the limits of possibility. Neoliberalism is an ideology, backed by powerful political forces, rather than a scientifically accurate account of the actual limits we face in making the world a better place. While it may be the case that the specific policies that constituted the menu of social democracy in the Golden Age have become less effective and need rethinking, taming capitalism through rules that neutralize some of the worst harms of capitalism remains a viable expression of anti-capitalism. The political obstacles to a reinvigorated progressive social democracy may be considerable, but this does not mean that the nature of capitalism no longer makes it possible for its harms to be mitigated by state action.¹¹

Resisting capitalism

Both taming and smashing capitalism require high levels of sustained collective action by coherent organizations, especially political parties, attempting to exercise state power. Taming capitalism hopes to use state power to neutralize the harms of capitalism; smashing capitalism imagines turning state power against capitalism itself. A third strategy, *resisting* capitalism, operates outside of the state:

Resisting capitalism seeks to alleviate the harms of the system, but does not attempt to capture state power. Rather, it seeks to affect the behavior of capitalists and political elites through protest and other forms of resistance outside of the state. We may not be able to transform capitalism, but we can defend ourselves from its harms by causing trouble, protesting, raising the costs to elites of their actions. This is the strategy of many grass-roots activists of various sorts: environmentalists who protest toxic dumps and environmentally destructive development; consumer movements that organize boycotts of predatory corporations; activist lawyers who defend the rights of immigrants, the poor, sexual minorities. It is also the basic strategic logic of unions which organize strikes for better pay and working conditions.

¹¹ For a discussion of the continuing viability of progressive social democratic policies in spite of globalization and financialization of capitalism, see Lane Kenworthy, *Social Democratic America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Jonas Pontusson, "Once Again a Model: Nordic Social Democracy in a Globalized World," in *What's Left of the Left*. Eds. James Cronin, George Ross and James Schoch. Durham, NC and London: Duke University, 2011, pp. 89-115. For a discussion of how a reconstructed version of social democracy could once again tame capitalism, see Joel Rogers, "Productive Democracy," *The Nation (150th Anniversary Issue)* 400 (April 6, 2015), pp. 206-210.

In one form or another, resisting capitalism is probably the most ubiquitous response to the harms of capitalism. It is rooted in civil society, connected to solidarities of work and community. Often the agenda of resistance to capitalism is animated by a diverse range of identities beyond class: ethnicity, religion, race, gender. In its more organized forms, resisting capitalism is largely carried by social movements and the labor movement. But even when unions are weak and a hostile political environment makes collective social protest difficult, workers on the shop floor resist the oppression of the capitalist labor process and the exploitation of capitalist class relations. An intrinsic feature of exploitation is that exploiters depend on the effort of the exploited. And since human beings are not robots, this means that in one way or another people are able to withhold their maximum effort and diligence. This is the most basic form of resisting capitalism.

Escaping Capitalism

One of the oldest responses to the depredations of capitalism has been escape. Escaping capitalism may not have generally been crystallized into systematic anti-capitalist ideologies, but nevertheless it has a coherent logic:

Capitalism is too powerful a system to destroy. Truly taming capitalism would require a level of sustained collective action that is unrealistic, and anyway, the system as a whole is too large and complex to control effectively. The powers-that-be are too strong to dislodge and they will always co-opt opposition and defend their privileges. You can't fight city hall. *Le plus ça change le plus c'est le même chose*. The best we can do is to try to insulate ourselves from the damaging effects of capitalism, and perhaps escape altogether its ravages in some sheltered environment. We may not be able to change the world at large, but we can remove ourselves from its web of domination and create our own micro-alternative in which to live and flourish.

This impulse to escape is reflected in many familiar responses to the harms of capitalism. The movement of poor farmers to the western frontier in 19th century United States was, for many, an aspiration for stable, self-sufficient subsistence farming rather than production mainly for the market. The utopian communities of the 19th century attempted to create largely self-sufficient communities that would function on principles of equality and reciprocity. Workers cooperatives attempt to create workplaces organized around principles of democracy and equality, free of the alienation and exploitation of capitalist firms. Escaping capitalism is implicit in the hippie motto of the 1960s, "turn on, tune in, drop out." The efforts by certain religious communities, such as the Amish, to create strong barriers between themselves and the rest of the society involves removing themselves as much as possible from the pressures of the capitalist market. The characterization of the family as a "haven in a heartless world" expresses the ideal of family as a noncompetitive social space of reciprocity and caring in which one can find refuge from the heartless competitive world of capitalism.

Escaping capitalism typically involves an avoidance of political engagement and certainly of collectively organized efforts at changing the world. Especially in the world today, escape is often an individualistic lifestyle strategy. And sometimes it is an individualistic strategy dependent on capitalist wealth, as in the stereotype of the successful Wall Street banker who decides to "give up the rat race" and move to Vermont to embrace a life of voluntary simplicity while living off of a trust fund amassed from capitalist investments.

Because of the absence of politics, it is easy to dismiss escaping capitalism as a form of anti-capitalism, especially when it reflects privileges achieved within capitalism itself. It is hard to treat the wilderness hiker who flies into a remote region with expensive hiking gear in order “to get away from it all,” as a meaningful expression of opposition to capitalism. Still, there are many examples of escaping capitalism which do bear on the broader problem of anti-capitalism. Intentional communities may be motivated by the desire to escape the pressures of capitalism, but sometimes they can also serve as models for more collective, egalitarian and democratic ways of living. Certainly cooperatives, which are often motivated mainly by a desire to escape the authoritarian workplaces and exploitation of capitalist firms, can also become elements of a broader challenge to capitalism and building blocks of an alternative form of economy. The D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) movement may be motivated by stagnant individual incomes during a period of economic austerity, but it can also point to ways of organizing economic activity that is less dependent on market exchange. And more generally, the “life style” of voluntary simplicity can contribute to broader rejection of the consumerism and preoccupation with economic growth in capitalism.¹²

Strategic Configurations

These four forms of anti-capitalism can be thought of as varying along two dimensions. One concerns the *goal of strategies* responding to the harms of capitalism: strategies can either envision *transcending the structures* of capitalism or simply *neutralizing the worst harms* of capitalism. The second dimension concerns the *primary locus of strategies*: strategies can either be primarily directed at gaining access to state power, or located in civil society. Taking these two dimensions together gives us the typology in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Typology of Anti-Capitalist Strategies

		<i>Goal of Strategy</i>	
		<i>Neutralizing harms</i>	<i>Transcending structures</i>
<i>Primary locus of strategy</i>	<i>The state</i>	<i>Taming capitalism</i>	<i>Smashing capitalism</i>
	<i>Civil Society</i>	<i>Resisting capitalism</i>	<i>Escaping capitalism</i>

Actual struggles responding to capitalism often combine these different strategic logics in different configurations. Three of these are specified in Figures 2.

¹² For a discussion of the transformative potential of voluntary simplicity, see Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*, (New York: Penguin, 2010).

Figure 2. Strategic configurations

	Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
The state	Taming capitalism	Smashing capitalism
Civil Society	Resisting capitalism	Escaping capitalism

Communist movement

	Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
The state	Taming capitalism + Democracy	Smashing capitalism
Civil Society	Resisting capitalism + Labor Movement	Escaping capitalism

Social Democracy

	Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
The state	Taming capitalism	Smashing capitalism
Civil Society	Resisting capitalism	Escaping capitalism

Social movements

In the twentieth century, Communist Parties often explicitly advocated combining resisting capitalism with smashing capitalism. Communist militants were encouraged to participate actively within the labor movement on the belief that this was an essential part of building working class solidarity and transforming working class consciousness. The strategy was still ultimately directed towards a system-rupture organized through the control of state power, but an essential part of the process through which this was thought to become eventually possible “when the time was ripe,” was vigorous Communist Party involvement in militant resistance to capitalism within the labor movement.

Progressive social democracy also involves resisting capitalism, but in this instance combining it with taming capitalism. Here the labor movement was organizationally closely connected to social democratic parties. Sometimes, indeed, this connection took the form of social democratic parties being in practice the political arm of the labor movement. Much of

the progressive reformism of social democracy came from the influence of the labor movement on social democratic politics, and one of the reasons for the decline of anti-capitalism within social democracy is the decay of labor militancy in resisting capitalism.

Social movements responding to the harms of capitalism often only resist capitalism in a defensive response to its depredations, but sometimes this is combined with practices that attempt to build alternatives to capitalist relations. In the 19th century, cooperatives and mutual societies often emerged in the context of resistance to capitalism, and in contemporary times the social and solidarity economy has also often been fostered by social movements. In some cases, such as the landless peasant movement in Brazil, invading unused land and building alternative forms of economic structures becomes the central tool of resistance itself.

These three configurations were the main strategic responses to injustice and oppression in capitalist societies in the twentieth century. By the end of the century, the first of these had all but disappeared because of the apparent failure of the idea of smashing capitalism. Social democracy in developed capitalist countries too has declined, if not disappeared, and largely lost its connection to labor militancy. The most dynamic form of anti-capitalism in the first decades of the 21st century has thus been anchored in social movements that continue to pronounce that “another world is possible”. Mostly such resistance to capitalism has been disconnected from an overarching political project directed at state power and thus from political parties. However, in at least some of the movements opposing capitalism in Latin America and Southern Europe, the beginnings of a new strategic idea may be emerging that combines the bottom-up, civil society centered initiatives of resisting and escaping capitalism with the top-down, state-centered strategy of taming capitalism. This new strategic configuration, shown in Figure 3, could be termed *eroding capitalism*.

Figure 3. Eroding Capitalism

		Goal of Strategy	
		Neutralizing harms	Transcending structures
Primary locus of strategy	The state	Taming capitalism	Smashing capitalism
	Civil Society	Resisting capitalism	Escaping capitalism

Eroding Capitalism

Eroding Capitalism

While the strategic idea of eroding capitalism is sometimes implicit in social and political struggles, it is not generally foregrounded as the central organizing principle of a response to social injustice. Here is the underling reasoning:

The strategy of erosion is grounded in a particular understanding of the concept of “social system”. Consider capitalism as an economic system. No economy has ever

been – or ever could be – purely capitalist. Capitalism is defined by the combination of market exchange with private ownership of the means of production and the employment of wage-earners recruited through a labor market. Existing economic systems combine capitalism with a whole host of other ways of organizing the production and distribution of goods and services: directly by states; within the intimate relations of families to meet the needs of its members; through community-based networks and organizations in what is often called the social and solidarity economy; by cooperatives owned and governed democratically by their members; through nonprofit market-oriented organizations; through peer-to-peer networks engaged in collaborative production processes; and many other possibilities. Some of these ways of organizing economic activities can be thought of as hybrids, combining capitalist and noncapitalist elements; some are entirely noncapitalist; and some are anti-capitalist. We call such a complex economic system “capitalist” when it is the case that capitalism is dominant in determining the economic conditions of life and access to livelihood for most people. That dominance is immensely destructive. One way to challenge capitalism is to build more democratic, egalitarian, participatory economic relations in the spaces and cracks within this complex system where this is possible. The idea of eroding capitalism imagines that these alternatives have the potential, in the long run, of becoming sufficiently prominent in the lives of individuals and communities that capitalism could eventually be displaced from this dominant role in the system as a whole.

A loose analogy with an ecosystem in nature might help clarify this idea. Think of a lake. A lake consists of water in a landscape, with particular kinds of soil, terrain, water sources and climate. An array of fish and other creatures live in its water and various kinds of plants grow in and around it. Collectively, all of these elements constitute the natural ecosystem of the lake. This is a “system” in that everything affects everything else within it, but it is not like the system of a single organism in which all of the parts are functionally connected in a coherent, tightly integrated whole. Social systems, in general, are better thought of as ecosystems of loosely connected interacting parts rather than as organisms in which all of the parts serve a function. In such an ecosystem it is possible to introduce an alien species of fish not “naturally” found in the lake. Some alien species will instantly get gobbled up. Others may survive in some small niche in the lake, but not change much about daily life in the ecosystem. But occasionally an alien species may thrive and eventually displace the dominant species. The strategic vision of eroding capitalism imagines introducing the most vigorous varieties of emancipatory species of noncapitalist economic activity into the ecosystem of capitalism, nurturing their development by protecting their niches, and figuring out ways of expanding their habitats. The ultimate hope is that eventually these alien species can spill out of their narrow niches and transform the character of the ecosystem as a whole.

This way of thinking about the process of transcending capitalism is rather like the typical stylized story told about the transition from pre-capitalist feudal societies in Europe to capitalism. Within feudal economies in the late medieval period, proto-capitalist relations and practices emerged, especially in the cities. Initially this involved merchant trading, artisanal production under the regulation of guilds, and banking. These forms of economic activity filled niches and were often quite useful for feudal elites. As the scope of these market activities expanded they gradually became more capitalist in character and, in some places, more corrosive of the established feudal domination of the economy as a whole. Through a long, meandering process over several centuries, feudal structures ceased to dominate the economic life of some corners of Europe; feudalism had eroded. This process may have been punctuated by political upheavals and even revolutions, but rather than constituting a rupture

in economic structures, these political events generally served more to ratify and rationalize changes that had already taken place within the socioeconomic structure.

The strategic vision of eroding capitalism sees the process of displacing capitalism from its dominant role in the economy in a similar way. Alternative, noncapitalist economic activities, embodying democratic and egalitarian relations, emerge in the niches where this is possible within an economy dominated by capitalism. These activities grow over time, both spontaneously and as a result of deliberate strategy. Some of these emerge as adaptations and initiatives from below within communities. Others are actively organized or sponsored by the state from above to solve practical problems. These alternative economic relations constitute the building blocks of socialism, understood as an economic structure whose relations of production are characterized by democracy, equality, and solidarity. Struggles involving the state take place, sometimes to protect these spaces, other times to facilitate new possibilities. Periodically what seems to be structural “limits of possibility” are encountered, and to go beyond such limits may require more intense political mobilization directed at changing critical features of the “rules of the game” within which capitalism functions. Often such mobilizations fail, but at least sometimes conditions are ripe for such changes, and the limits of possibility expand. Eventually, the cumulative effect of this interplay between changes from above and initiatives from below may reach a point where the socialist relations created within the economic ecosystem become sufficiently prominent in the lives of individuals and communities that capitalism can no longer be said to dominate the system as a whole.

This strategic complex combines the progressive social democratic vision of changing, from above, the rules of the game within which capitalism operates in order to neutralize its worst harms, with more anarchist visions of creating, from below, new economic relations that embody emancipatory aspirations. No political movement explicitly embraces this strategic complex of resisting, taming and escaping capitalism in order to erode, in the long term, its dominance. But impulses in this direction can be found in political parties that have close ties to progressive social movements, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Eroding capitalism might also resonate with youthful currents within some established center-left parties – for example, Bernie Sanders supporters in the Democratic Party within the 2016 American presidential election or the Corbyn forces within the British Labor Party.

There are, of course, many reasons to be skeptical. Three issues are particularly vexing.

First, there is the problem of the state. The idea of eroding capitalism depends in significant ways on initiatives by the state. But the state in capitalist society is not simply a neutral apparatus that can be readily used by social forces opposed to capitalism. It is a particular kind of state – a capitalist state – designed in such a way as to systematically protect capitalism from threats. Eroding capitalism, therefore, is only possible if, in spite of the in-built class biases of the capitalist state, it is nevertheless possible use the state to create new rules of the game that can facilitate the expansion of emancipatory noncapitalist relations that point beyond capitalism. Just as in feudal society, in spite of its feudal character the state enabled new rules of the game that ultimately undermined feudalism, so too in capitalism it may be possible for a capitalist state to enable rules that ultimately undermine capitalism. The fact that the capitalist state is not an instrument ideally suited to the erosion of capitalism does not mean it cannot be used imperfectly for that purpose.

However, for the capitalist state to be used even imperfectly to erode capitalism, there must be political forces mobilized to use it for these purposes. Eroding capitalism, like any strategy, needs collective actors. Strategies don’t just happen; they are adopted by people in organizations, parties, and movements. This is the second vexing issue. Where are the collective actors for eroding capitalism? In classical Marxism “the working class” was seen as the collective actor capable of challenging capitalism. Few people today see the working class as sufficiently homogeneous to readily become what used to be called the “Subject of history”.

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Rather, the formation of a politically coherent collective actor for a potent anticapitalism of the 21st century will require bringing together people from a much more heterogeneous set of structural locations in the economy and society. Class remains at the center of such collective action, since, after all, the objective of struggle is the transformation of the class structure; this is what eroding capitalism means. But the political identity of the collective actor must be forged around the values of democracy, equality and solidarity rather than simply class as such, and this means constructing such a collective actor with people from a much more heterogeneous set of locations in the social structure. This is a daunting task. Figuring out how to do it as a central problem for the left in world today.

Finally, even if there was a robust coalition of people with diverse identities connected through the belief in the desirability and possibility of a democratic, egalitarian alternative to capitalism, there is the problem of the time horizon for a strategy of eroding capitalism. There is little prospect of the dominance of capitalism being seriously eroded in the short-run. Eroding capitalism depends upon the significant expansion of diverse forms of non-capitalist economic organization capable of meeting needs and generating livelihoods, and this takes time. Effective political mobilization, however, almost always focuses on immediate grievances and seeks solutions that bring improvements in people's lives in the relative short run. The possibility of combining sustained struggles for immediate improvements with a longer-term vision of social transformation is one of the things which energized social democratic politics in the middle of the 20th century. Eroding capitalism is only likely to become a sustainable strategy if this combination can be recreated in a new way the 21st century. This requires a concentrated struggle against the ideological hold of neoliberalism on center-left politics, especially the neoliberal claim that only by intensifying competition and reducing the constraints on capitalist investment can the lives of most people be improved. The upsurge of what has been termed "populist discontent" on both the left and the right in recent years offers some hope that a genuine break with neoliberalism within social-democratic parties may be possible.

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So, how to be an anti-capitalist in the 21st century? The fantasy of a revolutionary rupture in which the dominance of capitalism is smashed has little credibility. Some individuals may personally be able to escape capitalism by moving off the grid and minimizing their involvement with money and the market, but this is hardly an attractive option for most people, especially those with children, and certainly has little potential by itself to foster a broader process of social emancipation. Eroding capitalism by connecting the strategic logics of taming, resisting and escaping is the only plausible option for a strategy of challenging capitalism that points beyond capitalism. This means fostering political projects of taming capitalism through public policies and fostering socio-economic projects of escaping capitalism through the expansion of emancipatory forms of economic activity. Both of these efforts need to be anchored in forms of resistance by organized collectivities - social movements and labor unions above all, but also community organizations and sometimes even NGOs. We need a renewal of an energetic progressive social democracy to neutralize the harms of capitalism in ways that also facilitate initiatives to build emancipatory alternatives with the potential to erode the dominance of capitalism. This is an anticapitalism for the 21st century