

It's all about potatoes and computers

Recipes for the cookshops of the future



In the early eighties, Swiss author **p.m.** – the most common initials in the Zurich telephone directory – published *Bolo'Bolo*, 'a field guide to organising utopias', in the words of one reviewer. 'Replete with maps, drawings, a new lexicon and universally recognised symbols, and "a planetary menu for subversion", the text could be considered a political nerd's version of one of Tolkien's fantasies, but its references to real events and reflexive tone give the book a kind of crackpot sense of real possibility.' A quarter-century later, p.m. is still planning.

ACCESS TO LAND AND KNOWLEDGE

The coming centrality of 'the commons' – based on the principle of the unconditional survival of all human beings on a decent basis – is obvious at this historical moment. At first they appear to be a 'fall-back-option' for a system that is unable to allocate, use and distribute social assets in a rational way. But sustaining a social metabolism on the basis of obscure 'laws' of values, profits and interests was never a good idea and is now revealed as a catastrophic one. (It has never really been just an *idea*, but an instrument of oligarchic power. That's the dirty family secret of it.)

The future commons really boils down to two elements: access to land (i.e. food,

fuels) = bites; and access to knowledge (the capacity to use and improve all means of production, material or immaterial) = bytes. It's all about potatoes and computers.

With regard to both of these aspects, we see numerous movements that are struggling for – or, partly, already constituting – a new global commons. Whereas the principles are more or less uncontested and self-evident, the forms and necessary institutions are still unclear.

The commons cannot be based on some law of value. Land and knowledge should be shared according to needs. Everybody should have an equal say in everything. Nobody should be excluded

on whatever grounds. Human fragility should be respected.

A commons without a *consciously constituted* community is unthinkable. Common usage must be based on reliable and equal communication and anti-oligarchical forms of organisation ('democracy'). Without such a social consensus, an unregulated commons will end in tragedy, given that this planet has ecological limits. Democracy is necessary since, without it, a ruling sub-group will always lack the motivation and responsibility necessary for efficient planetary stewardship. When the community suffers, the planet suffers.

The population of the whole planet earth is *one* community – simply for lack

of outsiders. However, communication on practical, everyday matters on this scale is difficult – even with the help of email, Facebook and all other kinds of tools. Although it may sound a bit grandiose to speak about planetary planning at the present moment, some kind of institutionalised planetary allocation of resources will have to be achieved. Our oil, water, fertile soils, minerals, hunting and fishing grounds cannot be the exclusive domain of those who happen to be sitting on top of them by virtue of historical accident. If History must end – a good idea! – we must together discuss the terms of this ending.

Obeying Warren Buffett's motto of only investing in what we understand, I suggest we start our discussion of the global commons by considering our immediate neighbourhoods.

MICRO-AGRO: NEIGHBOURHOODS AND BOROUGHES

Ultimately the whole output of the complex planetary economic machine ends up as commodities that we use in our homes and neighbourhoods. If our everyday lifestyles can be redefined to respect general ecological (=healthy biosphere) and psychological (=happiness) limits, the rest will fall into place. At the moment, the world is divided: an 'affluent' 20 percent consume 80 percent of the resources, whilst a poor 80 percent share the remaining 20 percent. If we consider the whole planet as one community, the prospects of living together peacefully look bleak indeed if we cannot overcome this chasm. There must be an understanding of a 'good life' on a planetary basis: creating ways of us earthlings living together. The trust and cultural solidarity needed for the collective and sustainable use of resources can only be established on the basis of *justice*. Climate and geographical circumstances can be taken into account – we do not all have to live the same way – but our demands on the ecosystem must roughly be the same. Thanks to scientific advances, there is no reason why we should not all lead a decent life with plenty of spare time for our hobbies. Technical productivity is so high at the moment that capitalist 'value' has problems catching up with it.

Now, what might a good neighbourhood life look like in, let's say, Switzerland, my accidental home country? A **neighbourhood** of about 500 members will not be purely urban, but linked to a piece of land of about 100 hectares (247 acres), situated within a perimeter of 15 to 80 kilometres (10 to 50 miles), depending on local conditions. Inhabitants of the urban community merge into one cooperative with those who farm the linked land. The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which published a report on global agriculture comparable in scope to that published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, recommends mid-sized agricultural units as the global solution to feeding the 9 billion or so people who will be living a few decades in the future. (Given fossil fuel inputs, the net caloric output of large agro-industrial production is negative and therefore has no future if we are to tackle carbon emissions and climate change.) The only feasible way of doing agriculture on this planet is intensive, mixed-crop, largely organic production: permaculture. This form of agriculture is hopelessly unprofitable under current conditions – so a new type of cooperation between consumers and producers must be found. In fact, the very distinction has to be abolished, transforming agricul-



tural work into a part of housework for everybody. I call this system of 'global reruralisation' **micro-agro**.

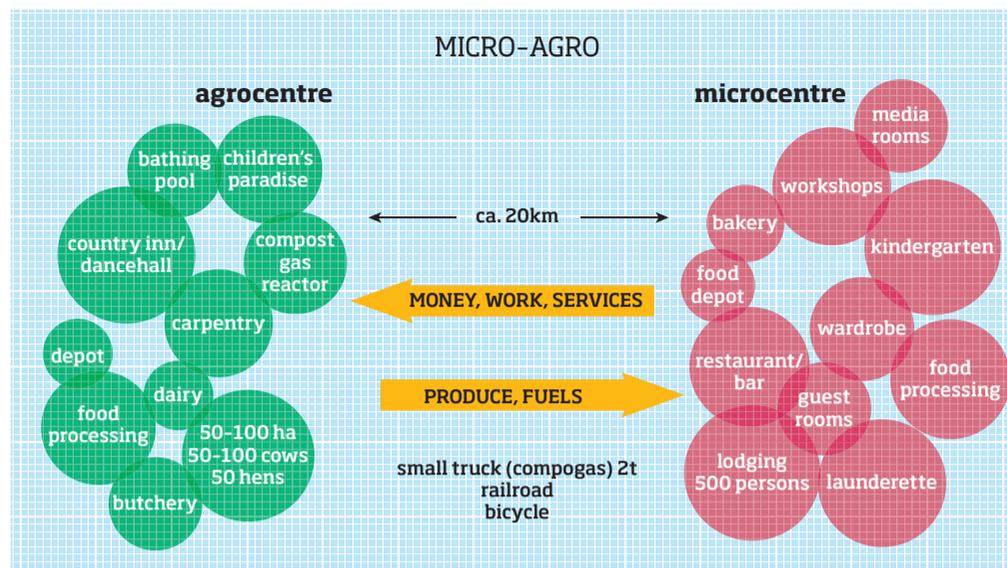
Micro-agro links two nodes: an urban microcentre and a rural agrocentre. A microcentre is a cluster comprising a food depot, communal kitchen, lounge, and restaurant – it's a service centre catering to all of the neighbourhood's 500-odd members. About 400m² are required for the shop or food-depot (similar in size to a small supermarket). Here, food is stored, prepared, processed and cooked to guarantee a basic supply of nutrition.

If we calculate 1.8kg (4lb) of foodstuff per person per day, this generates a transportation volume of 900kg per day, let's say 7 tonnes a week. With deliveries three times per week, this means 2.3 tonnes each time – a small truck, theoretically. As the heaviest of the produce (potatoes, cereals, oils, legumes, etc.) is only delivered seasonally and in large quantities, this will allow more energy-efficient means of transportation (train, boat) a few times a year, delivering to a large number of adjacent microcentres at the same time. So, a smaller truck is sufficient for the every-other-day deliveries. This truck can be fuelled by the biogas produced from consumer waste. (Biogas trucks already exist.)

The agro-centre is internally diversified and can produce all of the main types of food: milk, cereals, vegetables, fruits, berries, eggs and so on. This diversification is technically feasible within relatively large units (100ha). In fact, it's necessary for the mixed-crop system to work. Exchange with neighbouring microcentres can further increase the diversity of foods.

Some products – salt, sugar, oils, coffee, wine, spices, etc. – cannot reasonably be produced on single-neighbourhood or even regional levels. Their production and distribution will remain territorial, continental or even global.

At the level of **boroughs** or **small towns** (roughly 40 neighbourhoods of 20,000 persons), additional distribution centres are necessary. This could be a 2000m² supermarket, specialising in territorial or global products that are exchanged on



the basis of fair contracts. (As an example, in our house we can drink coffee bought directly from farmers in Chiapas via the Rebelia cooperative.) This supplementary supermarket would be located in the town centre – no more than a kilometre away – along with schools, administrative offices, special stores, cinemas, and so on. Called **MiCo**, these supermarkets could be territorial cooperatives (like the Migros supermarkets in Switzerland) and would be associated with territorial production and distribution centres – bakeries, breweries, sugar factories, etc.

The whole circuit of food production, distribution, preparation, consumption and waste re-use can be democratically managed under direct control of the people concerned. This is an important element of food sovereignty, and ultimately also of political power. People who can feed themselves are less prone to being blackmailed and exploited on other levels. Only on the basis of such global subsistence can supplementary systems of division of labour and cooperation (industry, research) remain anti-oligarchic and also ecologically sound.

INDUSTRIAL SUBSISTENCE: REGIONS AND TERRITORIES

The capitalist industrial basis of our society is in crisis at the moment. Some

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of it must be got rid of, because it is not sustainable. The car industry, for instance. If we want a global commons based on justice, our power output can never exceed 1,000 watts and this, in most contexts, precludes the use of private cars. Trains, buses, tramways and boats were and are viable alternatives. Some of the industrial capacity used for cars and aeroplanes can be dedicated to the development and

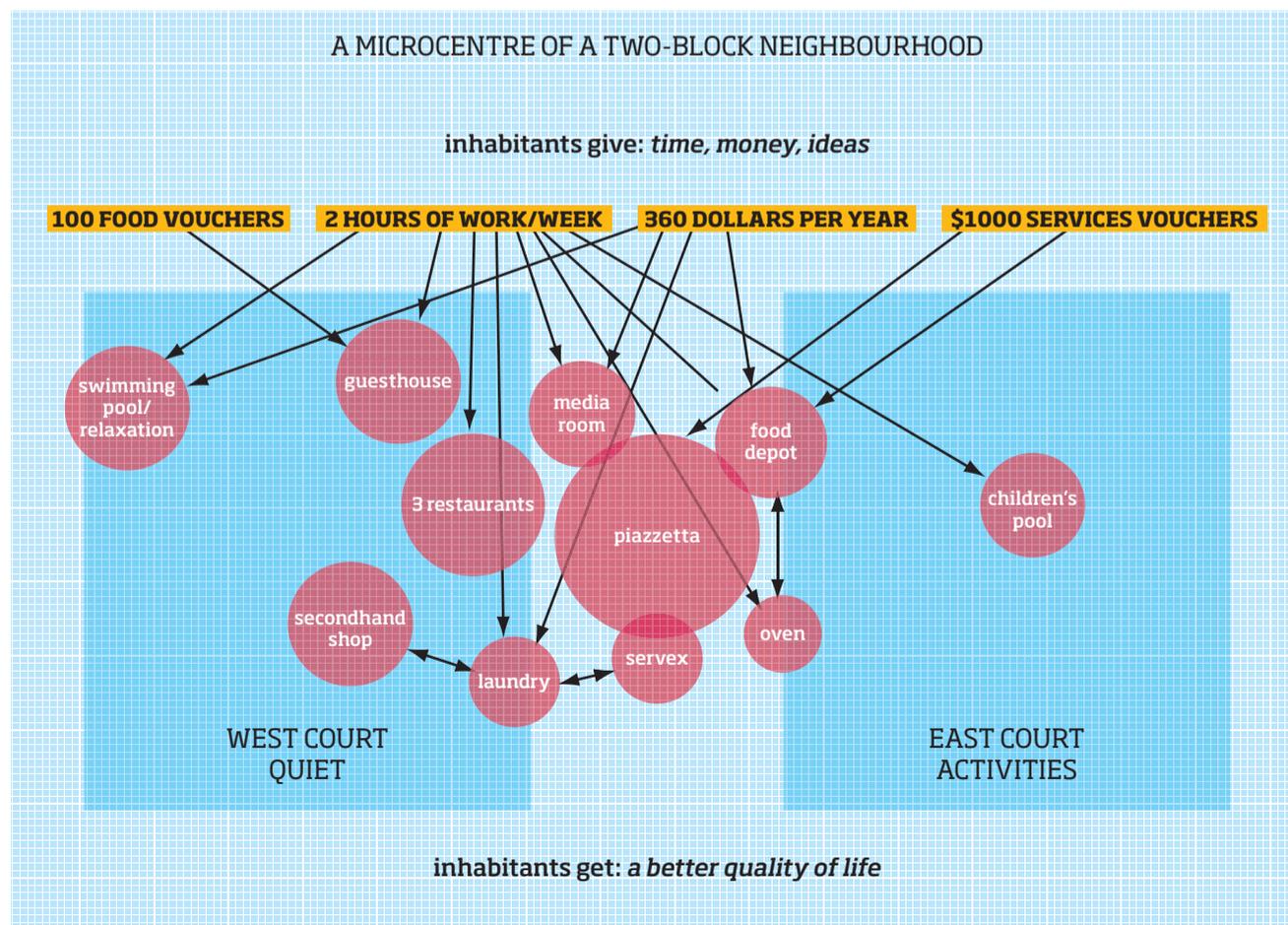
production of such means of transportation. Jobs, qualifications and technological know-how would not all be lost. Whatever we do, the overall volume of transport must be reduced, be it 'private' or 'public'. This can be achieved by reintegrating as many functions as possible into neighbourhoods and boroughs (see above).

How can our industrial basis be managed differently? At the moment, the way out seems to be nationalisation. As bankruptcies become more frequent, the state can acquire factories at cheap prices. Nationalised industries have a bad track record, and not just because of the neoliberal propaganda against them. The old nation state with its opaque institutions is not capable of managing an entire industrial base in the interests of the people. The opaque 'trust' must be transformed into a system of democratically organised *general services*. Ever since E.F. Schumacher wrote *Small Is Beautiful*, we have known that inefficiency arises if the size of organisations doesn't correspond to their optimal range of operations. 'Economies of scale' can also mean a smaller scale. So the *general services* must not form one big company, but rather exist as an articulated network of subsidiary, semi-autonomous entities. Why don't we call this system **industrial subsistence**?

Without a certain degree of direct inter-personal communication, there can be no democracy. But before we try to invent brilliant new systems of industrial democracy, we should start with what is already there. I have mentioned two 'levels' of democracy, the neighbourhood and the small town or borough. The neighbourhood is not a branch of *general services*, but rather a kind of collective household managed by its members. This form of direct democracy has been tested in innumerable cooperatives in countless forms all over the world. It has its limitations and problems, but there is no alternative unless you want to hand over control over your everyday life to anonymous organisms that 'know better'.

Things look different on the level of towns or boroughs (20,000 persons), especially if they're lumped together into larger cities. Here, existing public services can be augmented, perfected and democratically supervised. A borough is a kind of 'basic municipality' and could be the first branch/agency of the *general services*, providing water, energy, transportation, schools, a polyclinic, street maintenance, security, justice, housing/building, a fire brigade, communication media and so on. Already, prices for these services are 'political' – there's no market. In Zurich, for instance, the city has decided to lower water prices and the city owns its own electricity supply – it is the only city in Switzerland where electricity rates have been stable in recent years. Other cities have foolishly privatised these services, and the price of electricity has risen drastically.

At the level of small towns, public supervision of the management of services still works pretty well. Prices and rates can be set by democratic referendums. If we want to pay less for tram tickets, we can decide to do so. The goals are not profit or competition, but political: the welfare of the town's inhabitants, as well as ecological concerns. There is neither anonymous regulation nor the market's 'invisible hand', but conscious collective choice. As the private sector is collapsing, this model can be extended accordingly. Building companies can be taken over, clothes or furniture exchanges can be established, repair companies



of all kinds can become public services (plumbers, roofers, electricians), media can become freely accessible (the bytes!), local industries can become 'public workshops'. In this way, existing public services can be extended into all industries through *vertical integration*. Public transport enterprises can take over the construction of trams, the school system can take over print shops, paper factories, furniture factories, construction companies, etc.

At the next level – **regions** of hundreds of thousands of people, or seriously big cities (New York, Shanghai, Moscow) – additional services and industries exist. These include hospitals, universities, power plants, concrete factories, opera houses, zoos, museums and ice rinks. They too can be democratically managed. Such urban services have a long tradition, but in a new situation, new services and enterprises can also be created. A **cooperatory** – not to be confused with a cooperative – is a platform where agents of social productivity interact. In such places, 'innovators' of all kinds meet 'the public' and arrange finance from regional banks. The idea of the bank here is to facilitate the pooling of resources for large-scale enterprises. The 'anticipation of necessary future resources' (communal planning) is also integrated into these institutions. Decisions would not be taken by obscure boards of directors, but in public assemblies. From the point of view of communication, it's an ideal 'market'; from the point of view of the commons, it's a democratic council. When you have an idea nowadays, you have to consult a whimsical bank employee, in the future you'll go to your regional cooperatory.

Cooperatories are also places where bytes are shared. Knowledge becomes a common stock on which anyone can build. The internet can function as a global on-line *cooperatory*, supporting the network of off-line *cooperatories*. But purely virtual cooperation will never work properly, because personal interaction is infinitely richer in channels of information (including body language). Ideas are not just ideas – you also have to see what a person looks like when she has an idea. Thus the internet and face-to-face gatherings of real people must complement one another.

A **territory** is an area in which most places can be reached by train in one or two hours. Thus daily interaction is possible and ecologically sound. Not too many services should be produced on this level – far fewer than nowadays – but some will have to be. Territories on this scale include present-day small nation-states (e.g. Estonia, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Ireland), regions (Brittany, Andalusia, Lombardy) or states (Iowa, Saxony, Andhra Pradesh). They are ideal for general services of many kinds: education, building materials, transportation, justice. Typically having between two and ten million inhabitants, territories allow for a mix of direct (referendums) and indirect (parliamentary) democracy without the risk of overly grandiose nationalisms. At the same time, strong territories are the best means of dissolving traditional states like Britain, France, Germany, Russia or the US with their exaggerated power politics. The condition for this political healing process is the existence or creation of effective general services in these territories.

At the next level of organisation of general services are **continents** or **subcontinents**, composed of networks of relatively autonomous territories. Long-distance railway lines, river and

SPHERE	GENERAL SERVICES	CREATIVE ENTERPRISES	AGRICULTURAL SUBSISTENCE
SECTORS	industry, social services	crafts, light industries, services, arts	agriculture
FORM OF CONTROL	indirect democracy	free association	direct democracy
NUMBER	350,000 'branches' (towns)	indefinite	14,000,000 neighbourhoods

Table 1: The trinity of the commons

sea transport, energy, technology and research, and the exchange of 'natural resources' can all be organised at this level. With the disappearance of cars and most trucks, there will be a renaissance of trains and boats on canals or along coasts. A kind of industrial subsistence is possible in this area – steel, aluminium, machine modules, chemical substances, electrical appliances, transport systems, communication networks etc. High-tech elements produced on a continental or global scale make regional production an option again. Like Lego blocks, these modules can be combined and adapted to local needs. A truly ecological design with no short-term profit constraints can be realised, allowing an increase in energy efficiency by a factor of 10.

Industrial subsistence also means a technological leap. Numerous innovations have not been developed or been repressed because they do not promise profits. Much ecological design is already technologically feasible and available. The Product Life Institute (www.product-life.org), for instance, stresses durability, adaptability, modularity and reparability in its designs. These aspects make them incompatible with capitalist profitability and control: they save work and resources, they do not imply large-scale production, they're intrinsically use-value oriented and are unfit for the production of surplus-value or for authoritarian command structures. The decentralised production of energy (not just solar, but from a wide range of sources) in the hands of communities affords a material autonomy that is much more reliable than a politically constructed one. (Actually, 'material autonomy' is just another way to say 'subsistence'.)

Ultimately, the planet as a whole is the commons. With the help of the internet *bytes* can be shared without limit. Information has already gone beyond all limitations imposed by the law of value. If people's livelihoods are guaranteed by subsistence and general services at all levels, free sharing of intellectual production is possible without endangering the survival of its producers. (It isn't easy to talk about shareware if you have nothing to share.) The planet can become a sphere for the free exchange of knowledge and ideas. Ultimately, these knowledge commons also have an impact on physical production – blueprints for machines and all manner of products are freely available.

In addition to these intellectual commons, a material commons must be constituted to establish a just distribution of resources. Burning fossil fuels, for example, cannot be considered a local or national concern. Carbon dioxide doesn't recognise borders. So there must be a global agency (perhaps constituted out of a transformed United Nations) that limits the amount of fossil fuels that can be taken out of the ground and that makes sure that what is extracted is distributed fairly.

A prerequisite for the creation of a truly democratic organisation at a global level is subsistence and democracy at all the levels below: neighbourhood, borough, region, territory and (sub)continent. At the moment the constituency of planetary organisations are nation states of very

unequal political power and different levels of democratic decision-making. The global commons cannot be managed under the supervision of superpowers or regional groupings. What we need are two converging movements: first, the dissolution of large nations, along with the empowerment of territories, and second, the creation of effective and legitimate planetary institutions. The first process is actually under way, although sometimes with very unsavoury motivations – new micro-nationalism, ethnic exclusivism, short-sighted oligarchic or 'tribal' interests (small can also be ugly). Maybe this step back to small-scale ethnic/tribal/micro-nationalisms might be needed as a stepping stone that breaks up larger powers, which in turn spurs two steps forwards towards planetary-scale institutions – think of Uiguria or Tibet.

THE TRINITY OF THE COMMONS

The commons have three spheres: **general services, creative enterprises and agriculture**. Each sphere is an aspect of a comprehensive global commons, but they operate differently, both materially and institutionally.

General services can only be managed by delegation, from the bottom up, with strict rules ensuring fair play, non-exclusivity and democracy. Even so, there's a risk of compartmentalisation, of re-oligarchisation, of the 'authority of the steam-engine' (as Engels called it), or put another way, there can be no democratic

discussions in the cockpit of an airplane. Technological constraints can also give rise to certain delays in accountability. The use of such technologies can be minimised (no nuclear power plants, fewer airplanes, fewer risky technologies, prohibition of toxic substances) and their management can be made more transparent with democratic supervision. But there remains an intrinsic risk of some misuse of power. Therefore it is essential that the other two spheres have different material power bases, with different institutions and constituencies.

Diversity of social organisation is important for stability, just as natural diversity is for the biosphere. Agricultural subsistence is the ideal counter-balance to the general-services sphere: it's tactically independent, managed by directly democratic entities (neighbourhoods) and it operates on different rhythms (those of nature). The creative enterprises – that permeate all sectors – also act as a counter-balance to general services. Such enterprises have the most diverse organisational structures (from a one-person venture to a global cooperative) and they may operate with market systems, with money, bartering, gifts or just when there is occasional demand.

The trinity of the commons corresponds to the political wisdom of the separation of powers, of checks and balances. It represents material democracy and structural prudence: do not put all your eggs in one basket! Do not trust yourself. This trinity can be summarised – see table 1.

In traditional ideological terms, this system could be defined as a compromise between communism/socialism, anarchism and communitarian subsistence.

Table 2 is – alas! – not the definitive blueprint of post-capitalist planning. It merely serves as a



LEVEL/PERSONS	GENERAL SERVICES	CREATIVE	AGRICULTURE
Planet 6.9 billion	fossil fuels, energy, communication, pharmaceutical drugs, global bank, steel, emergency aid, space travel, scientific research, means of transportation, electronic components, weapons, synthetic materials	software, music, literature, film, fashion, cosmetic products, computers, games, musical instruments	emergency aid, seed banks, spices, coffee, tea, cocoa, spirits, tobacco, coca
Subcontinent 0.5 to 1 billion	vehicles, boats, canals, water supply, energy grids, machinery, engines, paints, chemical products, electric parts, continental bank	clothing, cosmetic products, software, circus, household items, music, theatre groups	wines, olives, canned goods, cereals, cheese, fish, condensed milk, dried mushrooms and beans, nuts, truffles
Territory 10 million	energy, trains, buses, tribunals, metal products, university, ceramics, glass, paper, territorial cooperatory and bank	local textiles, bags, cups, bicycles, carpets, literature, brushes, music	cereals, potatoes, sugar, beer, salt, wine, cheese, sausages, oils
Region 0.1 to 1 million	water, energy, hospital, public transports, concrete, police, sewage recycling, theatre, regional cooperatory and bank	furniture, wood, straw, leather products, hats, special vehicles, jewellery, stationery, pots, casinos	milk products, fruit, meat, eggs, poultry, vegetables, herbs, sausages, hams, chocolate, fish
City 0.1 to 1 million (can coincide with a region or even a territory)	water, energy, opera, museums, ice rinks, swimming pools, public transportation, sport stadiums, parks, cooperatory (and bank)	cabarets, restaurants, clothing, shoes, meats, sweets, spirits, cigars, beer	urban gardens, bees, berries, nuts, rabbits, chickens
Borough/town 20,000	primary school, high school, health centre, dentist, energy, plumbing, police, cooperatory	accessories, belts, ties, computers, cookies, beer, furniture	herbs, take-away meals, pasta, lemonades, flowers
Neighbourhood 500	water, energy, building maintenance, sewage, kindergarten	clothing, washing, cleaning, repairing, child care, housework	bread, yoghurt, herbs, berries, urban gardening, pizza
Individual 1		personal hygiene, gifts, mutual help, clothing, individual enterprises, massages	meals, urban gardening, herbs in balcony pots, digestion

Table 2: The three spheres of the global commons

reductionist illustration of a very complex web of production, levels of organisation, fields of activities. The three spheres should not be seen as isolated, but as interactive, within and across organisational levels. The services, products and enterprises are only examples. Similar products can appear in all three columns.

PLANNING? WHAT PLANNING?

The excesses and blunders of state planning in the old socialist countries have given planning a bad name. In fact, planning just means thinking about the future and making the necessary adjustments. It is understandable that the ruling oligarchs do not want to think about the future, and even want to forbid thinking about it. As their system is unsustainable, they even flirt openly with its ruin to keep everybody on their toes. Without risk there is no profit, or only a very small one. Confronted with the present crisis the attitude towards planning seems to be getting more relaxed, more pragmatic – if markets are dysfunctional, maybe some planning could help. Profits are down anyway. In countries like France, that have always known a certain level of planning, the impact of the crisis is felt less, and the 'French Model' seems to be the darling of *The Economist* at the moment. It was not planning that got the socialist countries into trouble, but *bad* planning.

A postcapitalist household system is in principle demand-oriented. Instead of dumping commodities onto a market, goods that are needed are ordered by the consumers (who in turn are organised democratically on various levels). The producers (the same people wearing different hats) try to match these orders with the available resources (including their capacity or willingness to produce them) and give feedback to the ordering persons/institutions, who in turn modify their orders. This system of *iterative planning* seems clumsy, but computer programmes that can support it already exist. According to Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell's *Towards a New Socialism*, there is no amount of complexity that such planning algorithms couldn't handle. Even if consumer/producer iterations go back and forth numerous times, the specifications can be calculated and recalculated within seconds. So almost unlimited planning is possible. And it should be used, because it is the most just and the most

ecologically sound procedure. (Markets are terribly wasteful!)

But before we begin to establish such planning mechanisms, we have to answer the question of what it is that should be planned. There is no pressure to minimise planning from the technical point of view – the idea that you'd need skyscrapers full of calculating bureaucrats is completely obsolete. But the principle of leaving people as free as possible to communicate directly is sound. Planning can lead to distortions and can create unwelcome power-bases that must be counter-balanced. Planning should not be a fetish, but merely a system of support, when interpersonal communication becomes too complex.

It is obvious that all the activities in the first sector or sphere, general services, must be planned at a global level. Already, most of these services are planned. However, once we have gotten away from present-day systems – which will need planning – subsistence agriculture requires minimal planning. The actual production of most food in agrocentres is left directly to the neighbourhoods. Agriculture operating on the level of territories, (sub)continents or the planet (producing salt or spices say) can be planned with the same mechanism as the general services. The third sector or sphere represents a very necessary counter-weight against a possible

planning frenzy in the first.

The creative sphere, too, only needs minimal planning. The diversity of goods and services produced in this sector is so large and the activities so ephemeral that detailed planning could only happen after the event, which means it wouldn't be much different from what we now call the market. What this sector needs is a certain pool of resources (sourced from the other two sectors and from more basic branches of its own) that it can play with, without endangering social or ecological equilibria. This sector will be a mix of

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The infectiousness of small commodity production?

Is there a risk that capitalist relationships could arise again out of small-scale monetarised production, spreading from the sphere of creative enterprises? (This is a big concern in some parts of the left which demand completely moneyless exchange.) I think that there is no danger of this happening.

Firstly, the two other spheres both operate beyond commodity-exchange and the 'law' of value and they provide full existential security, so that any blackmailing with 'jobs' is impossible.

Secondly, there is no historical evidence that modern industrial capitalism automatically arises out of small commodity production. If that were true, capitalism would have originated in China, India or the Near East, where such conditions existed for thousands of years (much earlier than in Europe). Modern capitalism emerged with the creation of territorial states at the end of the 15th Century, and with their need for a cannon-building industry, which in turn was financed by the emerging banking systems of Florence, the Netherlands and Germany. Only these state-run enterprises were able to break down traditional small-scale commodity production, whose stagnation had been successfully guaranteed by guilds for hundreds of years. Shoe factories do not grow out of the neighbourhood cobbler's shop!

Thirdly, small commodity production need not be completely unregulated and can be contained within healthy limits. Ecological regulations must certainly apply, as well as minimum-wage conditions. Small commodity producers must also pay compensation ('taxes') for the use of communal goods and services, so that they don't turn into a parasitical 'free enterprise sphere' for extra-profits of informal oligarchies. As everybody's survival is amply cared for by subsistence and general services, a sphere of free association can really be a domain of free expression, not a sector where the law of the jungle applies. As we know, free enterprise is not free for those who must take any job just to survive: it's just the ideology of the exploiters and oppressors. Maybe even some elements of the guild system can be reactivated.

supply- and demand-oriented enterprises that use all kinds of regulation, including markets, free distribution and planning. The attempt of some of the state-capitalist bureaucracies to plan or regulate the area of small businesses led to some of its most depressing and ridiculous results. (Cockshott and Cottrell are optimistic that even this sector, down to the improvised lemonade stand at the street corner, could easily be planned within a few minutes. They also suggest, that – unfortunately – socialist planning came too early to be feasible. And when it began to look feasible in the 1960s, the bureaucrats stopped computerised planning because they were afraid of losing their hold on power and privileges. The planning bureaucracy itself had now become one of the major sectors of the economy.)

Iterative, democratic and permanent planning, as described above, is very different from current capitalist and defunct socialist planning. There is no separate planning authority – planning is not a command-structure – but it is one of the general services that are at everybody's disposal. Most of it is already in existence. If we had to re-invent and re-establish all the current patterns of supply which have evolved historically, this would in fact be a Herculean effort. But all we have to do is to feed the existing supply webs into the computer and then simply modify them according to the new requirements of the commons. (To do this, the existing bar code system is useful.)

ELEMENTS OF A (GREEN) NEW DEAL OF ECO-SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION

Currently there isn't sufficient awareness of the necessity for a comprehensive social, economic and political restructuring of our global system. By definition a crisis is a turning point in the capitalist project: we could get further exploitation and oppression, or we could move beyond capitalist domination. It is difficult to discover how strong and how prepared the forces of radical change really are. Assuming that such forces exist, some provisional, but plausible, proposals for specific action can be made.

Such proposals must be based on the present situation, not on imaginary revolutionary leaps. So they are reformist and gradual proposals that won't immediately change the capitalist system. They might

GAMBLING WITH SOCIAL CURRENCIES

In November 1999 – at the same time as the awakening of the intelligent multitudes in Seattle – a number of researchers and activists from nine countries gathered in Buenos Aires. They participated in a meeting at which the Latin American Network of Solidarity Socioeconomy (RedLASES) was created. Everyone had come to see how our barter clubs worked, to gain first-hand knowledge of that 'social currency' we had created with the (naïve?) intention of steering the fate of desperate entrepreneurship and two-digit unemployment rates towards a radicalisation of democracy...

It is true, we didn't manage to do it. We were wrong in thinking that capitalism's paradigm of scarcity could be overcome simply through the abundance represented by the barter fairs with social currencies. We mistook what we thought and believed in for what we needed people to believe in. We forget that Marxian truth that, in a class society, the dominant ideology is



that of the dominant class. People wanted to have money in order to have things, to improve their standard of living – a legitimate desire. Without access to the mass media, we invested in academia as a means to diffuse our ideas – never a good bet for new ideas! We ended up fighting over minor questions, when the important thing was to show we were gambling on another model of development, a model which was not at all utopian, if one understood the importance of emitting and distributing another currency. Under pressure to present a 'model system', we were slow to absorb lessons coming from

other experiences. We failed to convey the systemic dimension of the crisis, and thus the need for a systemic solution. We failed in producing a real-time articulation between the social currency, on the one hand, and other initiatives such as self-managed cooperatives, fair trade and ethical consumption, micro-credit and participatory budgets, on the other.

But to say that we were 'wrong' would be even more naïve. We have undertaken an important process of evolution. We have learnt many lessons, and today the micro-credit/social currency nexus is still making history in the everyday lives of many collectively organised entrepreneurs, hand-in-hand with public policy. *This is no small feat.*

Our strategic gambles for the future lie in showing that solidarity economy will only be the *development model* that we hope for if we manage to bring together everything that is presently disconnected: self-managed cooperatives, fair trade, responsible consumption, participatory budget-making, solidarity finances and social currencies. We must gamble that *social currencies* will become

an instrument in the radicalisation of democracy; or else they won't change how we relate to each other in any significant way.

To that end, we have to overcome the cognitive obstacles that arrest the process of social transformation that our time demands. These obstacles include: the lack of comprehension that there is an *abundance* of available resources – for any purpose and practice – made inaccessible by the artificial scarcity in which we live; our resilient incompetence in finding modes of articulating differences in synergy, accepting the other and their practices as legitimately other; and, our limited concept of responsibility, which we need to abandon so as to recognise that *we are always responsible for our part and the whole.*

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even appear to be solutions to soften its contradictions and problems.

Evidently, postcapitalist change must begin at the centre of capitalist globalisation, in the United States. It is inconceivable that comprehensive postcapitalist exclaves can coexist with an intact power structure of global capitalism. Of course, elements can be developed, tested and prepared in certain niches (Europe, Japan, South America), but they must be tentative and temporary. They must be abandoned before they get mutilated and perverted by the debilitating pressure of world capital. As soon as they are forced into a defensive position, they will degenerate and ultimately be re-absorbed by the hegemonic system. At the same time they will have set a discouraging example and will reduce the chance of a definite breakthrough.

In the US the postcapitalist era will probably take on the – historically false, but who cares? – name of a ‘(Green) New Deal’. It is obvious that the Green New Deal, as proposed by Obama and some Green parties, is only meant to be Plan B for the rescue of capitalism. It’s not even meant to be a deal, i.e. a bargaining proposition for unions, state and bosses, but just a list of measures. But it’s still in its soft phase and can be defined in different ways – if there is enough pressure. Why not hitchhike on this vehicle and make it greener, newer and fairer? It will basically establish state management of an almost-stagnant ‘capitalism’, with a profit-rate below one percent. The stronghold of the old oligarchies of capital will slowly be eroded and their companies will be integrated into the *general services*. From the current 50 percent, the share of Gross Domestic Product allocated by the state will rise to 70 percent or more, and so determine the strategic factors of development.

This benign strategy (scenario A) is based on the ability of the working classes to make the other option – aggressive exploitation, steep rise of the profit rate, ecological and military risk-taking – less appealing for the global oligarchies. The new French style of class struggle – taking managers or owners as hostages, threatening to blow up factories, riots – plus global rigidity on salaries, could help to convince them. An additional strategy of discouragement, of an anti-economical war of attrition, could comprise the following behaviours:

- refusal to buy the new (energy-efficient, hybrid) cars, for there is no such thing as an ecological sustainable car – an electric car is also a nuclear car, or a coal-powered car;
- insisting on ecological products, standards and services;
- refusal to replace unnecessary household goods;
- refusal of suburban segregation – instead moving together to urban centres;
- making connections with farmers and building up subsistence networks, boycotting supermarkets and small grocers alike;
- creating territorial subsistence (‘transition towns’);
- refusal of additional work, slowing down work rhythms;
- insisting on free social services (education, health, transport, income);
- boycotting shopping centres;
- watching DVDs in neighbourhood centres (microcentres), preferring inner-city cinemas and boycotting multiplex cinemas in shopping malls;
- slow food, slow work, slow travel;
- reduction of commercial consumption, substituted by communal sharing;

- exchange of goods for free.

These mostly individual activities cannot replace collective action, but they can become a nutritious side dish and keep the ‘movement of discouragement’ (of economic recovery) alive in periods of relative social tranquillity. Collective action is dependent on a logic of events: it is path-dependent, and not all events are possible at any given time, even if theoretically correct and necessary. (Maybe at this point Shakespeare could be more helpful than Marx.) But we can be confident that many opportunities soon will arise for effective collective action. All of this could lead the capitalist machine into such a quagmire that scenario A would look relatively appetising.

The following proposals are all based on scenario A. Scenario B – a global showdown – could be forced upon us, though. The winning of which seems very improbable to me. The costs would be immense. It’s the old question: *socialism or barbarism?*

A Green New Deal would bring the state, the capitalists and the unions to a table. The central item of the Deal would be the ecological and social reconstruction of the US. The population of the United States is roughly 300 million, so we’d *theoretically* be dealing with 600,000 neighbourhoods, 15,000 boroughs or towns, 300 regions and 30 territories. As the territorial distribution of the population isn’t homogeneous and various geographical factors come into play, the effective numbers will be somewhat different. The creation of 600,000 sustainable neighbourhoods based on micro-agro subsistence might cost \$5 million each (not including the costs of resettling suburbanites), totalling \$3.6 trillion. The establishment of lively town centres might cost \$20 million each, another \$300 billion. (In some towns, almost no investment would be necessary, in others hundreds of millions.) All in all, we’re talking about \$4 trillion that must be invested over a number of years. Additional investment should go into the reanimation of the (sub)continental train-system. The creation or relocation of regional and territorial industries alongside train tracks would also cost billions of dollars. The insulation of buildings, local energy plants, eco-design of industrial goods would create a final micro-industrial boom before terminal stagnation. This promise could be important to get some of the more enlightened (green) capitalists on board.

As costs of living could be reduced by these schemes without any loss of quality of life, the Green New Deal programme could easily be financed out of current wages – let’s say ten percent. Of course, it could also be financed by taxes or the national debt, but this would only distort the situation, defer payment and trigger inflation. In a sense, the proletariat of the US would found a virtual cooperative that would be able to determine the use-value aspect of capitalist development. The organisation of this cooperative would be the existing state, or the tripartite Green New Deal Board running the programme of ecosocial reconstruction – in real-political terms this is the state. The annual wages of the 100 million US workers currently total \$3.7 trillion, so ten percent of this would be \$370 billion a year. Within ten years, the programme could be financed without creating a new debt bubble and risking runaway inflation. Realistically, the programme would start out with a three percent contribution from current wages, increasing annually thereafter until it reaches 20 percent or

more, after ten to twenty years. Industry, of course, would profit from lower wages – but it would have to accept social direction regarding what it produces (no more cars, but trains, buses, micro-agro trucks, cheap medicines etc.).

At the same time, a part of the Green New Deal fund would have to go towards similar projects in poor countries (in Africa, South America, Asia) to reduce the planetary divisions within the working class – the only hope for forming planetary-scale institutions for living harmoniously. At least \$100 billion would have to be paid in ‘reparations’ each year in return for the flow of resources from global South to North over the past 500 years (in addition to current foreign aid of \$20 billion). This figure seems insufficient, but if we assume that all other nations follow the US-example, poverty on the planet could be eradicated within a few years. What the currently poorer countries need, however, must be worked out more concretely.

The idea at the heart of the Green New Deal is that the goose that lays golden eggs should not be killed before it has laid its last egg. This follows Marx’s insight that the basis of a new form of society must always be created within the old. We cannot postulate an instant alternative to capitalism, jumping over the old mechanisms from one day to the next. Revolutions are just not feasible any more in our complex social systems. So, the Green New Deal programme outlined above must have the *form* of a genuine inter-class compromise: (small) profits will be made, wages will be earned, a green business-cycle is engineered. It is obvious that we (waged workers, farmers and so on) lay all of the golden eggs, but at the moment we are only able to lay them under the existing conditions, not under some imaginary non-value conditions. The Green New Deal is largely non-confrontational, laws are mostly obeyed and expropriations few and far between. Property, as long as it doesn’t self-destruct (as is happening in the current financial crisis), is respected. The future is not conquered, but bought. The *content* of the Deal – and only this makes it an interesting deal for the working class – is the construction of the material bases of a postcapitalist global society. For the capitalists it’s a desperate Deal, but considering the other options, it could still be their best. They always said that they’d be dead in the long run. And who knows how it’ll really turn out? It could still happen that we chip in those three percent or ten percent and get ripped off. There’s that risk in any real deal.

At the end of the programme, the ex-working classes would have the material basis of the three spheres of the commons at their disposal. We can throw off the chains of waged labour, the law of value and the rule of the oligarchs (as persons, they can be absorbed into the general population and live happily ever after)... *If all goes well*, of course!

I can understand that my proposal of *real dealing* as opposed to *staunch resistance* looks like a form of defeatism. This is not the case. It presupposes a position of strength. To get into such a position seems optimistic, at the moment. But: *there is no alternative*.

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WALKING A NEW PATH

What’s to come? No one can know.

– Billy Bragg

Beginning in 1986, in Bolivia and

neighbouring countries,

economic structural

adjustment was initiated

by multilateral financial

institutions, resulting in

the privatisation of public

companies.

In 1999, the Bolivian

government privatised the water

system of Cochabamba, Bolivia’s

third largest city, and applied that

policy nationwide. Over several

months, we, the people, fought this

policy under the umbrella of The

Coalition for the Defence of Water

and Life. People mobilised in the

streets; the government responded

with violence. In April 2000, after

days of confrontations, the company

was expelled and the law changed.

The Water War, as it became known

throughout the world, was the

first popular victory in 18 years

of neoliberalism in Bolivia, and it

changed history.

Public management of the water

company was then instituted in

an attempt to clarify what ‘public’

means. However, our belief that we

could manage our water resources

better was naïve and mistaken. We

couldn’t build a self-managed public

company within a global context of

privatisation. The Water War became

not just about water but about what

neoliberalism deprived us of: our right

to participate in decision-making.

Throughout Bolivia and Latin

America, people are working hard

to replace the neoliberal system

with new systems of government.

Free-market philosophy has such

a stranglehold on global economic

development that new approaches are

thwarted everywhere. We believe that

one of our mistakes in re-visioning

economic policies is that we always

frame a ‘global economy’ when

the people are building a different

economy, one based on life’s realities,

not capital. The media does not report

these initiatives, so, they do not

‘exist’ in the formal world, but they

are happening nonetheless. We are

walking a new path that has many

problems, both known and unknown.

While we have made mistakes about

what could be done, we know that our

life of the past 20 years is not the way

forward.

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