

## Buying Dreams: Visions for a Better Future

Michael Albert

Left activists are moved, first and foremost, by refusal to tolerate injustice. Still, a clear conception of improved social relations can help us understand injustices we oppose and visions, of more desirable futures can help sustain and orient struggles today. Well and good, but why should people activated by today's social movements go "dream shopping" in leftist stores?

Let's face it: Not a few left visions, peddled as dreams, have turned into nightmares. First, there was the vision of substituting public for private ownership and central planning for "anarchy." Then there was the vision of a single vanguard party, whose members are sworn to serve the interests of the working class, and whose organizational skills are honed through self-sacrifice in struggle, replacing the hypocrisy of bourgeois politicking. And of course there were the "dreams" of a socialist economy automatically emancipating women by integrating them into "productive" labor in the public sector, and of a single proletarian culture sweeping away bourgeois cultural hegemony and "primitive," pre-capitalist cultural residues alike.

No doubt some will remark that these dreams-turned-nightmares were the exclusive property of the "revolutionary left" and that the "social democratic left" disavowed them long ago. This is true, but the social democratic left also threw out the baby with the bath water. There is little chance of buying a nightmare in disguise from a social democrat, not merely because they disavow certain false visions, but because they peddle no dreams at all. They prefer to peddle only policies for which they claim an already existing mass audience, such as electoral reform, better child care, fair housing, and full employment. These reforms are well worth fighting for, of course, and self-styled "radical dreamers" who do not participate in these struggles or who "pull punches" and play with "secret agendas" are no radicals at all. But there's little reason to visit today's social democratic teach-ins if you're looking for dreams as well as program. So have dreams become the exclusive wares of evangelists and gurus? Not necessarily. The first thing we should admit is there is no automatic relation between the diminution of material scarcity and desirable social relations. When Marx characterized "communism" as, first and foremost, a society without scarcity, and implied all problems of social relations would be rendered obsolete by material abundance, he put leftists dangerously off guard. The ecology movement should have taught us all by now that there cannot be complete material abundance. Moreover, for mortal beings time is inherently scarce regardless of how high the pile of material goods may become. And for social beings, whose relation to material wealth beyond subsistence is largely a matter of "invidious comparison," in a just society the size of the overall pile of goods is largely irrelevant. The notion that a sufficient advance in the "forces of production" would obviate the need to carefully build social relations that nurture humanist themes was utopian. There is no "communism" that automatically follows "socialism" as the "forces of production" develop sufficiently.

The second step is to clarify the criteria by which possible political, economic, community, and kinship institutions should be judged. Here we should draw freely from the wisdom of the long historical practice of progressive movements. In broadest terms, desirable social institutions help all citizens develop and fulfill their maximum potentials. Moreover, they do this in ways that do not sacrifice the well being of some groups to advance the interests of other groups. Creativity, diversity, excellence, and efficiency do not require social hierarchies, any more than "human nature" dictates that men must be misogynists, women

passive, non-whites analytically disinclined, or some people born to lead and others born to follow. Institutions in all spheres of social life should promote the goals of solidarity, variety, and collective self-management in which each person partakes in decisions in proportion to the degree she or he is affected by the outcome. We believe these goals promote human potentials, reflect lessons from progressive historical experience, and incorporate more specific goals worth pursuing such as peace, justice, freedom, equity, material well being, trust, and respect.

But to what extent can we project a more specific vision? What institutions promote rather than subvert these goals?

### **Participatory Democracy**

The Marxist-Leninist vision for political life is a recipe for disaster. Stalinism was an extreme form, but a logical extension of Leninism. And the counterproductive experience of Marxist-Leninist political parties out of power is perfectly consistent with the systematic suppression of democratic political life carried out by Marxist-Leninist parties in power. That the "dictatorship of the proletariat" could ever be equated with a desirable form of political life shall always remain a stain on the political escutcheon of "the Left." And outlawing all but a single "vanguard" party ruled by the norms of "democratic" centralism has nothing to do with democracy except its subversion. These political institutions systematically impede participatory impulses, promote popular passivity—if not outright fear—and breed authoritarianism, bureaucratism, and corruption in government. What can be expected when external opposition is outlawed, and the party leadership is able to suppress and manipulate internal opposition by transferring members between branches to provide themselves a majority in every branch and cell? But Western-style electoral "democracy" is also a far cry from participatory democracy. Highly unequal distributions of wealth stack the deck before the political card game begins. Citizens choose from "pre-selected" candidates who are effectively screened by society's power elites. But even if these problems were overcome, participatory democracy requires more than infrequently voting for a representative to carry out our political activity for us. While election of representatives is part of participatory democracy, frequent and regular referenda on important political propositions and policies, at every level of government, accompanied by a full airing of competing views, are as important, if not more important, than voting for candidates.

In any case, we should not expect political life to disappear, but to intensify in a desirable society. Politics will no longer represent a means by which privileged groups perpetuate their domination. Nor will oppressed constituencies have to battle against political norms that preserve an unjust status quo. But there should be no lack of spirited disagreement about social choice. While the goal of social diversity dictates that competing conceptions should all be implemented by their adherents whenever possible, there will be many situations when one program will have to be implemented at the expense of others. The problem of "public choice" will not disappear, and since a desirable society will kindle our participatory impulses, there is every reason to expect political debate to heat up as well.

The goals are straightforward. In Chomsky's words:

*A truly democratic community is one in which the general public has the opportunity for meaningful and constructive participation in the formation of social policy.... A society that excludes large areas of crucial decision-making from public control, or a system of governance that merely grants the general public the opportunity to ratify decisions taken by the elite groups... hardly merits the term democracy.*

The central question is, what institutional vehicles best afford people such an opportunity? Ultimately, political controversy must be settled by democratic vote. And obviously such votes will be better informed the greater participants' access to relevant information concerning consequences. So it is also clear that groups with competing opinions must all have access to effective means of communicating their views. Democratization of political life must include democratization of the media.

Participatory democracy requires not only democratic access to the media and a plethora of single-issue political organizations, but also a pluralism of political parties with different social agendas. If we reflect briefly on the history of political life within the left, and the ultimate consequences of attempting to ban parties, factions, or any form of political organization people wish to avail themselves of, it should be clear that bans are anathema to democracy.

### **Intercommunalism**

We will not be magically reborn in a desirable society, free of our past and unaware of our historical roots. On the contrary, historical memory, sensitivity to social process, and our understanding of history will all be enhanced during the process of reaching a desirable society. So the point is not to erase diverse cultures, nor to reduce them to a least common denominator. Instead the historical contributions of different communities should be more appreciated, and there must be greater means for their further development.

Trying to prevent the horrors of genocide, imperialism, racism, jingoism, ethnocentrism, and religious persecution by attempting to integrate distinct historical communities into one cultural "playpen" has proved almost as bad a dream as the nightmares this approach seeks to expunge. "Cultural homogenization" ignores the positive aspects of cultural differences that give people a sense of who they are and where they come from. Cultural homogenization offers few opportunities for variety and cultural self-management and proves self-defeating anyhow since it heightens exactly the community anxieties and antagonisms it seeks to overcome.

In a competitive, hostile, environment, religious, racial, ethnic, and national communities develop into sectarian camps, each concerned, first and foremost, with defending itself from real and imagined threats, if necessary waging war on others to do so. Dominant community groups rationalize their positions of privilege with myths about their own superiority and the presumed inferiority of those they oppress. Some elements within oppressed communities internalize these myths, and attempt to imitate dominant cultures. Others respond by defending the integrity of their own cultural traditions while combating the racist ideologies used to justify their oppression. But the solution lies in eliminating racist institutions, dispelling racist ideologies, and changing the environments within which historical communities relate. It does not lie in trying to obliterate the distinctions between communities.

An alternative is "intercommunalism," which emphasizes respecting and preserving the multiplicity of community forms we are blessed with by guaranteeing each sufficient material and social resources to reproduce itself. Not only does each culture possess particular wisdoms that are unique products of its historical experience, but the interaction of different cultures can enhance the internal characteristics of each and provide a richness no single approach could ever hope to attain—provided negative inter-community relations can be replaced by positive ones. But the key to this is eliminating the threat of cultural extinction by guaranteeing that each community shall have the means necessary to carry on their traditions.

Individuals should choose the cultural communities they prefer, rather than have others define their choice for them on the basis of prejudice. And while those outside a community should be free to criticize cultural practices that, in their opinion, violate humanist norms, external intervention, as opposed to criticism, should not be permitted except to guarantee that all members of every community have the right of dissent and to leave.

Most important, until a lengthy history of autonomy and solidarity has overcome suspicion and fear between communities, the choice of which community should give ground in disputes between two should be determined according to which of the two is the more powerful and therefore, realistically, least threatened.

Intercommunalism will make it incumbent on the more powerful community with less reason to fear being dominated to unilaterally begin the process of de-escalation. This simple rule is obvious and reasonable, despite being seldom practiced to date.

While the goal is clear—to create an environment in which no community will feel threatened so that each will feel free to learn from and share with others—given the historical legacy of negative intercommunity relations, there is no pretense this can be achieved overnight. More so than in other areas, intercommunalist relations will have to be slowly constructed, step by step, until a different historical legacy and set of behavioral expectations are established. Nor will it always be easy to decide what constitutes the "necessary means" that communities should be guaranteed for cultural reproduction, and what development free from "unwarranted outside interference" means in particular situations.

But the intercommunalist criterion for judging different views on these matters is that every community should be guaranteed sufficient material and communication means to self-define and develop its own cultural traditions, and represent their culture to all other communities, in the context of limited aggregate means and equal right to those means for all.

### **Participatory Economics**

What economic institutions and practices will permit people to pursue their material needs and desires efficiently and equitably while fostering collective self-management, interpersonal solidarity, and human and material diversity? The broad outlines of the answers are becoming increasingly apparent.

Ownership of the means of production must be social, not private.

Traditional Marxism was off the mark in some respects, but the proposition that private ownership of the means of production implies exploitation and alienation is not one we need to reconsider. Private ownership of the means of production means exploitation and alienation.

Organization of production and consumption must be democratic and participatory, not hierarchical.

Almost all progressives give lip-service to this proposition, but it means different things to different people. To us it means production should be managed by a council of all employees where each has equal say. But it also means the tasks of conception and execution cannot be distributed so some people always do the former and others the latter. Unless job complexes are arranged and rotation schemes developed so all do a mixture of conceptualizing, organizing, and carrying out production tasks, alienation and class hierarchies will persist. This does not mean every individual must rotate through every conceivable job. Nor does it mean expertise will not play an important role in decision-making, since democratic decision-making requires informed analysis even more than hierarchical decision-making. But planning and coordinating the productive

efforts of the many cannot be the exclusive province of the few in a desirable economy.

Allocation of goods and services should be achieved through a social, iterative, planning procedure in which distinct groups of producers and consumers propose and revise their own activities.

Neither free markets nor central planning promote human well-being and development. Markets misallocate resources; pit people against one another; and make social cooperation individually irrational. Far from being the liberators of socially productive energies their bourgeois champions claim them to be, markets breed socially destructive individualism. On the other hand, central planning has proved an unworthy substitute. Central planning breeds authoritarianism, apathy, and bureaucracy. The dead weight of central planning on people's creative capabilities is more than enough to justify the desperate groping for alternatives going on throughout the "existing socialist" world. But the answer does not lie in a return to markets. Nor should one hope for much from a combination of two allocative mechanisms, each fundamentally flawed. Work and consumption collectives are perfectly capable of developing an overall economic plan, as well as carrying it out. Individual collectives, and federations of similar collectives, are capable of proposing activities and revising those activities in light of qualitative and quantitative information received from one another in a planning dialogue. Modern computer techniques are more than sufficient to provide collectives with accurate and useful information about the implications of their choices for others, and the implications of others' choices for them. And a social, iterative planning procedure in which all participants are on equal footing is capable of yielding not only fair, but efficient outcomes as well. What is truly amazing is how few "radical" economists have devoted any of their considerable talents and energies to the task of refining the procedures of democratic planning that have supposedly been the center piece of visions of a socialist economy for over a century.

Distribution should be based on the principle: "From each according to ability, to each according to effort," until growing trust and solidarity permits distribution according to need.

It is now clear that the principle: "From each according to ability, to each according to work" was ambiguous. The increasing tendency to interpret this principle as "to each according to the market value of his or her contribution" must be rejected as a just distributive principle. Payment according to personal contribution may well be more fair than payment according to personal contribution plus the contribution of the means of production one happens to own. But there is nothing fair about payment according to personal contribution. And what may surprise many self-styled socialists even more, there is nothing efficient about payment according to personal contribution either.

Differences in contribution are due to differences in talent, preparation and training, job assignment, luck, and effort. As long as trust and solidarity are insufficient to elicit necessary productive efforts, an argument can certainly be made for rewarding effort on efficiency grounds. No doubt some would argue effort should be rewarded on equity grounds as well, and we are not inclined to quibble. But rewarding talent, preparation and training, job assignment, and luck makes no sense on either equity or efficiency grounds. Why is talent, which is the outcome of a genetic lottery, any more deserving of reward than the contributions of privately-owned means of production which is the outcome of an inheritance lottery? And since talent is not something reward can induce, there is no efficiency argument for rewarding it either. Provided preparation and training are undertaken at public expense, including compensation for any burdens beyond those born by people not receiving training, education neither deserves

nor requires reward to induce people to seek it. Rewarding the occupant of a job for the contribution inherent in the job itself makes no sense on either grounds. And there is clearly no justice or efficiency in rewarding luck. Which leaves us with the conclusion that rewarding the combined outcome of talent, preparation, job assignment, luck, and effort—which nobody could reasonably argue is the same as rewarding effort alone—is patently unfair and inefficient as well.

## **Feminism**

Kinship institutions are necessary for people to develop and fulfill their sexual and emotional needs and raise new generations of children. But present day gender relations elevate men above women and children, oppress homosexuals, and warp human sexual and emotional potentials. In other words, present day gender relations are almost universally patriarchal, and while there are differences, some of which are very important, this holds for "existing socialist" societies as well as for modern Western societies. In a humanist society we will have to eliminate oppressive definitions that are socially imposed so all can pursue their lives as they choose, whatever their sex, sexual preference, and age. There can be no non-biologically imposed sexual division of labor—men doing one kind of work and women another—nor any demarcation of individuals according to sexual preference. We need gender relations that respect the social contributions of women as well as men, and promote sexuality that is physically rich and emotionally fulfilling. New kinship forms must overcome the possessive narrowness of monogamy while allowing preservation of the "depth" that comes from lasting relationships. They must destroy the division of roles between men and women so that both sexes are free to nurture and initiate. They must give children room for self-management and learning, while providing the extra support and structure children need. But what will make this possible?

Obviously women must have reproductive freedom—the freedom to have children without fear of sterilization or economic deprivation, and the freedom not to have children through unhindered access to birth control and abortion. There can be no more compromising on this issue than compromising about private ownership of the means of production. Just as private ownership abrogates the rights of employees to control and direct their laboring capacities, denial of birth control and abortion abrogates the rights of women to control and manage their reproductive capacities and thereby their lives in general.

But feminist kinship relations must also ensure that child-rearing roles do not segregate tasks by sex and that there is support for traditional couples, single parents, lesbian and gay parenting, and more complex, multiple parenting arrangements. All parents must have easy access to high quality day-care, flexible work hours, and parental leave options. The point is not to absolve parents of child-rearing by turning over the next generation to uncaring agencies staffed mainly by women accorded low social esteem. The idea is to elevate the status of child rearing, encourage highly personalized interaction between children and adults, and distribute responsibilities for these interactions equitably between men and women and throughout society. After all, what social task could be more important than rearing the coming generation of citizens? So what could be more irrational than patriarchal ideologies that deny those who fill this critical social role the status they merit? In a desirable society, kinship activity must not only be arranged more equitably, but the social evaluation of this activity must be corrected as well.

Feminism should also embrace a liberated vision of sexuality respectful of individual's inclinations and choices, whether homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, monogamous, or nonmonogamous. Beyond respecting human rights, the exercise and exploration of different forms of sexuality by consenting

partners provides a variety of experiences that can benefit all. In a humanist society without oppressive hierarchies, sex can be pursued solely for emotional, physical, and spiritual pleasure and development. Experimentation to these ends is not merely to be tolerated, but appreciated.

Yes, the vision is uncompromising. It is a vision of gender relations in which women are no longer subordinate, and the talents and intelligence of half the species is free at last. It is also a vision in which men are free to nurture, childhood is a time of play and increasing responsibility with opportunity for independent learning, not fear, and in which loneliness does not grip as a vice whose handle turns as each year passes. The vision is one where living is reclaimed from the realm of habit and necessity, and is seen and appreciated as an art form we are all capable of practicing and refining. But there is no pretense that all this can be achieved over night. Nor do we claim a single kind of partner-parenting institution is the best for all. While the contemporary nuclear family has proven all too compatible with patriarchal norms, a different kind of nuclear family will no doubt evolve along with a host of other kinship forms as people experiment with how to achieve the goals of feminism.

### **The Importance of Dreams**

Things don't have to be the way they are. Human nature is not so stingy as to permit only minor variations on oppressive themes. The set of possible human worlds is not one-dimensional and limited to the way we live today. We must keep thinking and talking about more desirable visions, and keep refining what we want. And it is important to keep strategizing about how to reach our goals. There is no other way to "keep the dream alive." And if the dream dies, there is nothing.

Ontleend aan: <http://www.parecon.org> 23-01-03