CENTRE for POST CAPITALIST CIVILISATION

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PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

SERIES: TOWARDS (A BETTER) POSTCAPITALISM
A HANDY HOW-TO GUIDE

by Robin Hahnel

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Correspondence and submission: postcapitalism.centre@gmail.com, cc'ing s.mitralexis@metacpc.org, with 'méta Working Papers Submission' on the subject line.

Participatory Planning

Robin Hahnel

SERIES

Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide

mέta Working Papers' series "Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide" publishes solicited policy papers on aspects of how would a non-dystopian postcapitalism look like. The series focuses on three 'pillars':

Production | Allocation | Decision-making

i.e., how could/would postcapitalist *production* be like (and who would own the means of production), what shape would the *allocation* of goods take (and which alternatives to the market economy may be explored), and what would be the main tenets of postcapitalist *democracy*.

In this paper, Professor **Robin Hahnel** addresses the second pillar, 'allocation', as participatory planning.

Robin Hahnel is a radical economist and political activist. He is Professor Emeritus at American University in Washington, D.C. where he taught in the Economics Department from 1976 – 2008. He is currently a visiting professor in economics at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where he resides with his family. During the past fourteen years he taught as a Visiting Professor at Portland State University, Lewis and Clark College, and Willamette University in Oregon. His work in economic theory is informed by the work of Thorstein Veblen, John Maynard Keynes, Karl Polanyi, Pierro Straffa, Joan Robinson, and Amartya Sen among others. He is best known as co-creator, along with Michael Albert, of a radical alternative to capitalism known as participatory economics (or parecon for short). His more recent work is focused on economic justice and democracy, and the global financial and ecological crisis. Politically he considers himself a proud product of the New Left and is sympathetic to libertarian socialism. He has been active in many social movements and organizations over forty years, beginning with the Harvard and MIT SDS chapters and the Boston area anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s.

The Challenge

We want workers in *worker councils* to decide what to produce and how to produce it. We want consumers in *neighborhood consumer councils* to decide what they want to consume. But their activities are highly interrelated. Most obviously consumers can't consume what workers don't produce. Slightly less obviously, many of the inputs needed by one worker council must be produced as "intermediate goods" by other worker councils. And least obviously, any capital goods, any productive inputs from the natural environment, and any different categories of labor used by one worker council means they cannot be used by other workers. In short, the activities of all these worker and consumer councils must be coordinated… and the question is how? In the words of a 1950s TV game show, how to coordinate all these interrelated economic activities is the "$64,000 question." We want our councils to be free to do whatever they want, *but only as long as it is socially responsible*.

(1) **We don't want councils to treat those in other councils unfairly**. For example, we don't want consumers in a neighborhood council to consume more goods than they deserve because that would be unfair to consumers in other councils. And we don't want workers in one council to sacrifice less than workers in other councils because that would be unfair to workers in other councils, unless they agree to consume less because they chose to sacrifice less.

(2) **We don't want councils to use scarce productive resources inefficiently**. For example, we don't want one worker council to use an hour of carpentry labor if that hour would have produced something of greater social value elsewhere, or an acre of fertile bottom land if that acre would have produced something of greater social value if used elsewhere.

So the question is: How can we empower worker and consumer councils to manage themselves while protecting the interests of others in the economy who are affected by what these councils do? How can we give groups of workers *user rights* over parts of *society's* productive commons without allowing them to benefit unfairly from productive resources that belong to, and should benefit everyone?

What socialists have long understood is that what any one group in an economy does will inevitably affect many others. The conclusion many socialists have drawn from this fact is that democratic economic planning must allow all to have a voice and say regarding all economic decisions. This, of course, is correct as far as it goes. But different economic decisions do not usually affect everyone to the same extent. One might call this the *fundamental dilemma* faced by those of us who want to organize a system of economic decision making that gives people decision making power *to the degree* they are affected by different economic decisions: Most economic decisions do affect many people, but to differing degrees. The challenge is how to give workers and consumers in their own councils an appropriate degree of autonomy over what they do.

How can we give workers and consumers in their councils the autonomy necessary to stimulate them to become and remain active participants in economic decision making, while ensuring that worker and consumer councils do not make choices that are socially irresponsible? How is it possible to grant small groups of workers and consumers enough autonomy to encourage them to put time and effort into participating, without disenfranchising others who are affected by the decisions they make, even though it be to a lesser extent? How can we grant groups of workers the right to use some of society's productive resources as they would like without allowing them to benefit unfairly from doing so? How can we convince ordinary workers and consumers who have been discouraged in every conceivable way from trying to participate in economic decision making since time immemorial that things will now be different, and their participation will finally be worthwhile? The participatory annual planning procedure and the participatory investment and long-run development planning procedures explained in Parts III, IV, and V of *Democratic Economic Planning*[1] were designed to answer these questions.

The Annual Planning Procedure in Brief [2]

The participants in the annual planning procedure are worker councils and federations, consumer councils and federations, and an *Iteration Facilitation Board* (IFB) which plays a perfunctory role. Conceptually, annual participatory planning is quite simple: The social, iterative, planning procedure works as follows:

[1] Robin Hahnel, *Democratic Economic Planning* (Routledge Frontiers of Political Economy; London, New York: Routledge, 2021). Henceforth *Democratic Economic Planning*.

[2] In order to focus on the main contours of the planning procedure, the description here abstracts from features incorporated into the annual planning process for public goods and pollutants which involve federations of consumer councils, and "communities" affected by different pollutants.

(1) At the beginning of each round of planning the IFB announces current estimates of the opportunity costs of using all natural resources, all categories of labor, and all capital goods available for use, as well as current estimates of the social cost of producing different capital goods, intermediate goods, and consumption goods and services. These estimates can be thought of as "indicative prices" since they provide useful "indications" of what it costs society when we use different primary inputs, and what it costs society to produce different goods and services. In other words, the phrase "indicative prices" refers to estimates of what economists call opportunity and social costs.

(2) Neighborhood consumer councils respond by making consumption proposals. That is, they propose what goods and services their households want to consume. Worker councils respond by making production proposals. That is, they propose what "outputs" they want to produce and what "inputs" they want permission to use to accomplish this—including not only intermediate goods they need from other worker councils and capital goods they want to use, but any natural resources and different kinds of labor they would need as well.

(3) The IFB adds up all the demands for and supplies of each final good, intermediate good, capital good, natural resource, and each category of labor, and adjusts its estimate of the opportunity or social cost of the good – its "indicative price" — up or down in proportion to the degree of its excess demand or supply.

These three steps are repeated in subsequent rounds, or "iterations," until there is no longer any excess demand for any final or intermediate good, capital stock, natural resource, or category of labor.

But why won't consumer councils make proposals that are too greedy? Why won't worker councils make proposals that are too lazy, or use scarce productive resources inefficiently? And even if we assume that consumer and workers councils want to make socially responsible proposals, how would any consumer or worker council know if it is doing so?

This is where the rubber hits the road. *Each council must revise and resubmit its own proposal until it meets with approval from other councils.*

And this is where the indicative prices come in. *They make it easy for **all** to see if a consumer or worker council proposal is socially responsible.*

Consumption council proposals are evaluated by simply multiplying the quantity of every good or service requested by the estimated social cost of producing a unit of the good or service, to be compared to the average effort rating plus allowances of the households in the consumption council requesting the goods and services. If, for example, the average effort rating plus allowances for members of a neighborhood consumption council is equal to the social average, this should entitle them to consume goods and services whose production costs society an amount equal to the average cost of providing a neighborhood consumption request. A neighborhood council whose members have higher than average effort ratings plus allowances is entitled to a neighborhood consumption bundle which cost society more than the average; a neighborhood council whose members have lower than average effort ratings plus allowances should only be entitled to a consumption bundle which costs less than the average.

The important point is that the estimates of opportunity and social costs generated during the planning procedure make it easy to calculate the social cost of consumption requests. This is important information for councils making consumption requests since otherwise they have no way of knowing the extent to which they are asking others to bear burdens on their behalf. It is also important for councils which must approve or disapprove consumption requests of others, since otherwise they have no way of knowing if a request is fair — consistent with sacrifices those making the request have made — or unfair — in excess of sacrifices made.

Production proposals from worker councils are evaluated by comparing the estimated social benefits of outputs to the estimated social cost of inputs. In any round of the planning procedure the social benefits of a production proposal are calculated simply by multiplying quantities of proposed outputs by their "indicative" prices and summing, and social costs of a production proposal are calculated by multiplying quantities of inputs requested by their "indicative" prices, and summing.

If the social benefits exceed the social costs — that is, if the *social benefit to cost ratio* of a production proposal exceeds one, SB/SC > 1, everyone else in the economy is presumably made better off by allowing the worker council to do what they have proposed. On the other hand, if the social benefit to cost ratio is less than one, SB/SC < 1, the rest of society would presumably be worse off if the workers went ahead to do what they have proposed, unless there is something "the numbers" fail to capture. Again, the "indicative" prices make it easy to calculate the social benefit to cost ratio for any production proposal, allowing worker councils making proposals to determine if their own proposals are socially responsible, and giving all councils who must approve or disapprove production proposals of others an easy way to assess whether those proposals are socially responsible as well.

This procedure "whittles down" overly ambitious proposals submitted by worker and consumer councils about what they would like to do to a "feasible" plan where everything someone is expecting to be able to use will actually be available. Consumer councils requesting more than their effort ratings and allowances warrant are forced to either reduce the amounts they request, or shift their requests to less socially costly items if they expect to win the approval of other councils who have no reason to approve consumption requests whose social costs are not justified by the sacrifices of those making them. Similarly, worker councils are forced to either increase their efforts, shift toward producing a more desirable mix of outputs, or shift to a less socially costly mix of inputs to win approval for their proposals from other councils who have no reason to approve production proposals whose social costs exceed their social benefits.

Efficiency is promoted as consumers and workers attempt to shift their proposals in response to updated information about opportunity and social costs in order to avoid reductions in consumption or increases in work effort. Equity is promoted when further shifting is insufficient to win approval from fellow consumers and workers which can only be achieved through consumption reduction or greater work effort. As iterations proceed, consumption and production proposals move closer to mutual feasibility, and estimates more closely approximate true opportunity and social costs as the procedure generates equity and efficiency simultaneously. There is more to say regarding important questions such as externalities, public goods, and how long the annual participatory planning procedure is likely to take. But this is what it boils down to:

When worker councils make proposals, they are asking permission to use particular parts of the productive resources that belong to everyone. In effect their proposals say: “If the rest of you, with whom we are engaged in a cooperative division of labor, agree to allow us to use these productive resources belonging to all of us as inputs, then we promise to deliver the following goods and services as outputs for others to use." When consumer councils make proposals, they are asking permission to consume goods and services whose production entails social costs. In effect their proposals say: "We believe the effort ratings we received from our coworkers, together with allowances members of households have been granted, indicate that we deserve the right to consume goods and services whose production entails an equivalent level of social costs."

The planning procedure is designed to make it clear when a worker council production proposal is inefficient and when a consumption council proposal is unfair, and allows other worker and consumer councils to deny approval for proposals when they seem to be inefficient or unfair. However, initial *self-activity proposals*, and *all revisions* of proposals, are entirely up to each worker and consumer council itself. In other words, if a worker council production proposal or neighborhood council consumption proposal is not approved, the council which made the proposal and nobody else can revise its proposal for resubmission in the next round of the planning procedure. As far as we know this aspect of the participatory planning procedure distinguishes it from all other planning models in the literature, which we believe is crucial if workers and consumers are to enjoy meaningful self-management.

In sum, we have proven that under assumptions about technologies and preferences which are standard in the economic literature, each round in this social, iterative procedure will begin with new, more accurate estimates of opportunity and social costs, followed by revised proposals from all councils and federations in light of new information the changed "indicative prices" signal about how their desires affect others; until eventually a feasible, comprehensive plan for the year is reached, i.e. a plan where everything someone is counting on will actually be available.[3]

Addressing Concerns About Impracticality

Chapter 8 in *Democratic Economic Planning* addresses concerns that annual participatory planning is impractical because it cannot be done at a level of detail necessary, as well as concerns that adjustments cannot be made when unanticipated situations arise. Ironically, perhaps the most common objection people have raised to our proposal over the past thirty years arises from a simple confusion about what a *comprehensive economic plan* is, and is not. It is *not* a detailed plan of the kind that David Schweickart, Seth Ackerman, and initially Erik Olin Wright assumed, and which Schweickart ridiculed as "nonsense on stilts." Comprehensive annual planning is done using coarse categories, such as "shoes," not refined categories such as "size 6 purple women's high-heeled shoes with a yellow toe." There is no need to arrive at an annual plan for how much of every good to produce down to that level of detail. Coarse categories are turned into refined categories when the plan is carried out during the year as producers become aware of which kinds of shoes are being purchased. And when unforeseen events arise during the year a number of options for how to make adjustments are available.

As memory of real world centrally planned economies which engaged in comprehensive economic planning for many decades during the twentieth century recedes, apparently it has become difficult for many today to imagine how comprehensive economic planning is

[3] See chapter 7 in *Democratic Economic Planning* where we stipulate sufficient assumptions to prove this result as a "theorem."

even possible. While details and adjustments were often *not* handled well by real world centrally planned economies in the twentieth century, those real world experiences certainly demonstrate that comprehensive economic planning is not a practical impossibility as some today presume. In any case, chapter 8 explains not only how necessary details producers need are provided during implementation, but also why consumer preferences regarding product details will be taken seriously in a participatory economy even if they were not in real world central planned economies during the twentieth century, and how plans can be adjusted during the year in light of events which were not foreseen when the plan was created and agreed to. There are reasonable questions critics have raised about the wisdom of our proposals — objections which we have acknowledged and responded to as best we can. But dismissing any kind of comprehensive economic planning as simply impossible is not one of them.

Chapter 9 in *Democratic Economic Planning* addresses more legitimate concerns that participatory annual planning may prove impractical because it would require worker and consumer councils and federations to engage in too many iterations — rounds of proposals, rejections, revisions, and new proposals — to reach a feasible plan. If, indeed, the annual participatory planning procedure would be interminable in real time, it is only of theoretical interest. However, so far results of computer simulations of the annual participatory planning procedure reported in chapter 9 *strongly suggest* that our iterative, annual, planning procedure *cannot* be dismissed as a practical impossibility as some have done, but instead seems to be *quite* practical. The number of iterations required appear to be what worker and consumer councils and federations could easily do in the month of December, yielding a comprehensive annual plan ready to go on January first of every year.

Integrating Long-Run and Short-Run Plans

The chapters in Parts IV and V of *Democratic Economic Planning* spell out concrete proposals for (a) how to organize investment, educational, environmental, infrastructure, and strategic international economic planning, and (b) how to integrate these planning efforts with annual plans to identify errors in assumptions made when longer-term plans are drawn up, and revise those plans in light of better information when it becomes available to mitigate welfare losses.

What is obvious as soon as we recognize the practical necessity of having both short-run and long-run plans is that results from long-term plans are needed by those creating annual plans. Before we do annual planning we need to know how much of each capital good must be produced. We need to know what resources must be allocated to the educational system to train and teach various skills to the present and future workforce. We need to know what resources must be allocated to environmental protection and enhancement. And we need to know what industries we are expanding or shrinking in order to transform our economy's comparative advantages in the international economic division of labor. The answers to these questions come from the results of the various longer-term plans. In these ways the results from longer-term plans commit those who engage in annual planning to certain things they *must* accomplish during the year. In mathematical terms, the results from investment and development plans establish the "givens" during annual planning.

What is less obvious is how the results from annual planning can be used to identify mistakes in assumptions made when longer-term plans were created, so that longer-term plans can be modified to reduce losses in wellbeing. When investment and development plans are made there is no alternative to formulating *estimates* of what consumer preferences will be in the future, and what technologies will become available in the future. We explain who we propose be tasked with formulating these estimates below, taking both access to information and motivation into account. However, if these estimates prove to be inaccurate, as they inevitably will to some extent, then investment and development plans will fail to maximize social wellbeing because they will call for either too little or too much investment of different kinds.

Our most important contribution to the literature on investment and long-term planning is that we demonstrate how the results from subsequent annual plans *reveal* where errors were made when investment and development plans were initially created. At which point, we explain how investment and development plans can be revised in light of this new, more accurate information to mitigate welfare losses. The revised investment or development plan cannot do as well as an initial plan based on accurate estimates because it cannot undo the damage done by inaccurate estimates before they are caught. But the revised plans can nonetheless perform better than permitting initial plans to proceed uncorrected.

This is very important. Once it is conceded that as a practical matter economic planning cannot be done in one single operation covering many, many years, but must instead be done via separate procedures — i.e. once we recognize there must be an annual planning procedure, an investment planning procedure, and various long-term, development planning procedures — one must deal with the problem of how to integrate these different planning procedures with one another. If one cannot explain how this can be done to minimize inevitable efficiency losses due to inaccurate estimates of future parameters in longer-term plans, the argument against economic planning is strengthened. We rebut this argument by demonstrating how different planning procedures covering different time frames can be integrated to update information quickly and thereby mitigate welfare losses.

Our proposals for investment and development planning also address two issues many others ignore. While it is fine and well to propose that the division of output between consumption and investment be determined democratically after ample debate: (1) What is to be done about the fact that future generations who will be affected by these decisions cannot be present when investment and long-term development plans are drawn up? And (2) how can anyone vote sensibly about how much of present output to devote to investment rather than consumption unless they know how productive investment will be, i.e. how much future output will be increased by investment in more capital goods, more "human capital," or more "natural capital"?

Our answer to the first dilemma is what we call the "generational equity constraint." Depending on how productive investment proves to be, how damaging environmental deterioration proves to be, and how much higher consumption per capita proves to increase wellbeing, it may be that investment plans which are "efficient" either: (a) leave per capita consumption for early generations too low compared to per capita consumption for later generations, or (b) leave per capita consumption for later generations too low compared to per capita consumption for earlier generations, To prevent either from happening we propose that *before investment and development plans are created* the present generation choose a limit on a percentage, β, by which consumption per capita can differ between any two adjacent years. To protect itself against the possibility that efficient investment plans might call for levels of investment so high that it would be unfairly disadvantaged, the present generation would be wise to choose a β that is not too high. However, by so doing it would also protect future generations from the possibility that efficient investment plans might call for levels of investment so low that future generations would be unfairly disadvantaged. In effect, the generational equity constraint induces the present generation to serve as an honest broker on behalf of future generations, thereby protecting the interests of future generations who cannot be present when investment plans are drawn up and agreed to.

Our answer to the second problem is to carefully consider *who* should be delegated to estimate various terms in the efficiency conditions for investments in capital goods, human capital, environmental protection, and infrastructure, and who should be delegated to estimate the short-run efficiency losses and long-run efficiency gains from tariffs. For each kind of investment plan we consider both who is best suited to know how large some future benefit or cost will prove to be, and who might be motivated to either over or under estimate some benefit or cost.

- For investments in capital goods we propose that the National Federation of Consumer Councils assisted by its R&D department estimate changes in future consumers' utility functions. And we propose that the National Federation of Worker Councils with input from both its R&D department and industry federations of worker councils, estimate changes in future production functions.
- For investments in human capital we recommend that delegates to industry federations of worker councils work together with officials in the Ministry of Education to estimate both the production benefits and the social costs of more education. We propose that delegates to the National Federation of Consumer Councils together with officials from the Ministry of Education estimate the long-term

personal benefits from education. And we recommend that the national legislature in consultation with Ministry of Education be charged with providing planners with estimates of the political "capacitation" benefits of additional education.

- In the case of environmental planning we recommend that delegates to the National Federation of Consumer Councils estimate what environmental economists call the "use value" and "existence value" people will place on changes in the natural environment in the future, and that the Ministry for the Environment work with industry federations of worker councils to estimate the effects of investments in environmental protection and enhancement on production — where often what we need to know are the effects of declining stocks of environmental assets on future production.
- We recommend that the National Federation of Consumer Councils is best situated to estimate the value to households of changes in infrastructure, while industry federations of worker councils are the best judges of how much improvements in infrastructure will cost, as well as how much they will increase future production.
- In the case of strategic international economic planning the National Federation of Consumer Councils and federations of worker councils in different industries can serve as useful counterweights to one another. We recommend that the National Federation of Consumer Councils be made responsible for making the case that (a) what economists call "dead weight losses" for consumers in the present from tariffs or subsidies may be substantial, and that (b) future "producer surpluses" from shifting resources to industries experiencing more rapid technical change may be small. And we recommend that federations of worker councils in different industries be responsible

for making the case that a tariff or subsidy for their industry may generate significant future producer surpluses and productivity increases, while dead weight losses for consumers in the present may be small. Armed with the estimates of dead weight losses and future producer surpluses and productivity increases which emerge from this "dialogue," we recommend that the Ministry for International Economic Affairs be tasked with proposing tariffs and subsidies for different industries, including a schedule for their removal, to be debated and approved either by the national legislature or a national referendum.

Once each kind of investment plan is created and adjusted if necessary to be consistent with the generational equity constraint, we propose that it be debated and voted on by the national legislature or put to a national referendum, and then adjusted in light of new information which subsequent annual plans reveal to mitigate welfare losses as already explained.

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It has been noted that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, invoking the need for serious reflection on the end of the existing order and a transition to a postcapitalist way of life. Yet the future of the world economy is but one of the aspects of postcapitalism. After all, capitalism itself might be prima facie an economic system, but it has evolved into a comprehensive political, cultural, anthropological and international order. Postcapitalism, however it might evolve, is not merely the modification of an economic system; it will prove to be a new political, cultural, anthropological, civilisational paradigm — a new era indeed. A dystopian one, a utopian one, or anything in between. And the turbulences of the gradual transition are to be witnessed by all. The oligarchic decline of liberal democracy engenders countless variations of authoritarian tendencies; the supply chain of tributes for the global minotaur are increasingly interrupted; novel desiderata for emancipation are articulated; the chasms between megacities and provinces nurture silent, cold civil wars; the emergence of a non-Anglophone, non-Atlantic, non-liberal, non-bipartisan state as the planet's largest economy is just around the corner, overturning a two-centuries-old order; the changes in global demography and geopolitics are vertiginous; climate change is threatening our very existence. Transformations of gigantic proportions radically reshape the world before our very eyes.

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