

POSTCAPITALIST ALLOCATION: PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

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

by Michael Albert

méta Working Papers

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Postcapitalist Allocation: Participatory Planning

Michael Albert

SERIES

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

méta 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 *decision making* and *democracy*.

In this paper, **Michael Albert** addresses the second pillar, i.e. allocation, as *participatory planning*.

Michael Albert is a founder and current member of the staff of **Z Magazine** as well as staff of **Z Magazine's** web system: **ZCom**. Albert's radicalization occurred during the 1960s. His political involvements, starting then and continuing to the present, have ranged from local, regional, and national organizing projects and campaigns to co-founding South End Press, *Z Magazine*, the Z Media Institute, and ZNet, and to working on all these projects, writing for various publications and publishers, giving public talks, etc. Albert is the author of 21 books. Most recently these include: *No Bosses* (zero Books), *Fanfare for the Future* (ZBooks), *Remembering Tomorrow* (Seven Stories Press), *Realizing Hope* (Zed Press) and *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso).

Allocation determines amounts produced and consumed. It sets budgets and it arrives at prices. Economists tell us that for allocation “You can only opt for markets and/or central planning.”

Participatory socialists view those two anointed options and reply, “But both markets and central planning preclude attaining a productive commons. They enforce a corporate division of labour. They impose top down workplace decision making. They remunerate horribly inequitably. They melt, flood, and starve sustainability. We want better.”

Not deterred, economists rejoin, “okay, in that case you can combine markets and central planning and you can even impose various mitigating constraints on their operations. You can use markets here and use central planning there. You can legislate policies to restrict their worst tendencies.”

We reply, “That sounds like use Strychnine here and Cyanide there. But we don’t want postcapitalist apocalypse.”

We continue: “You proclaim central planning and markets are all there is. But you proclaim without argument. You proclaim without evidence. You just repeat Thatcher saying ‘there is no alternative,’ but pinpointed to allocation. But we get that if we just scream back ‘no, it isn’t so,’ we will convince few who witness our tantrum. So, we add that we seek allocation that settles on amounts produced and consumed, and on valuations of all products, labour, resources, and services. We seek allocation that is efficient, sustainable, and without class rule. We seek allocation in accord with a productive commons and our decision making, workplace, and remuneration innovations.”

“What a mouthful. Prove you can do it,” smirk the economists.

We reply: “Many books, videos, debates, and especially two recent full-length presentations include far more extensive discussion of participatory planning as well as of participatory economy’s other defining features.

My *No Bosses: A New Economy for a Better World*¹ is written for anyone interested in postcapitalist possibilities. Robin Hahnel’s *Democratic Economic Planning*² is written for economists and directly addresses their more technical concerns and arguments. Both Hahnel and I seek allocation compatible with four additional participatory economic aims:

- a productive commons in place of private ownership of productive assets;

¹ Michael Albert, *No Bosses: A New Economy for a Better World* (Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: John Hunt Publishing | zero Books, 2021).

² Robin Hahnel, *Democratic Economic Planning* (Routledge Frontiers of Political Economy; London, New York: Routledge, 2021).

- self-managed worker and consumer councils in place of top down workplace decision making and top down collective consumption decision making;
- jobs balanced for empowerment in place of coordinator class monopolization of empowering work;
- and income for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labour in place of income for property, power, and/or output.

Prior articles in this series address the above. This article summarizes the case for participatory planning. Can we employ markets and/or central planning to allocate consistently with our other aims? We answer: “no we cannot.” Can we conceive a new way to allocate consistently with our other aims? We answer: “yes we can.”

Goodbye Markets and Central Planning

Workplaces produce stuff and services. We all consume stuff and services. Allocation matches production and consumption and central planning has been the allocation choice of many self-titled “socialist” (but in our view, “coordinatorist”) economies. Central planning is also used within massive production units like Amazon and General Motors.

In central planning, a central planning agency collects and assesses information from workers and consumers. It then proposes inputs and outputs for all economic units. The units then consider the proposals and either implement them or register problems they think will arise in trying to implement them. The central planners assess the predicted problems and issue new instructions and the cycle repeats

until planners no longer seek responses. Details aside, down go questions, up go answers. Down go instructions, up go concerns/problems. Down go orders, up goes obedience.

Advocates of capitalism claim central planning can't succeed. They say central planning confronts too much information. Central planning screws up incentives. Such criticisms, however, have mostly missed their target.

First, at least according to mainstream economists' criteria, during decades of operations Soviet central planning worked rather well. Compare the Soviet Union to countries with comparable development from its inception date and then over the next seven decades. Consider, for example, the USSR and Brazil. The Soviet outcomes were superior in output, development, and many other indices. And second, as noted above, huge U.S. firms use central planning to internally allocate their workforces and resources. Again, by mainstream standards, they do this quite effectively. But, if central planning can get things produced and distributed, which it can, why not use it for our own postcapitalism?

In central planning, workers and consumers abide instructions planners generate. A narrow decision-making top commands a wide decision-obeying bottom. More, central planners don't want resistance from local units. Central planners are coordinator class and they want to communicate with others in the coordinator class. That is who they understand. That is who understands them. That is who shares their interests.

For those reasons, we find familiar corporate hierarchy and authoritative decision making throughout centrally planned economies.

Central planning disallows balanced job complexes. It destroys self-management. Even anti-capitalist planners who start out as honest advocates of workers' power, in time see themselves as more responsible and more important than workers. They begin to reward themselves and people like themselves more than the workers they command. Why "people like themselves"? Because the justification for the planners' higher incomes becomes their greater education, training, skills, connections, and decision-making responsibility, and, to be compelling, that justification has to be honoured for all who have those "credentials," which means not only those who centrally plan, but also those who rule local units.

In other words, central planners need local agents who will hold workers to norms central planners decide. Local agents must be locally authoritative. Their credentials must legitimate them and reduce other actors to relative obedience. Central planning thus welcomes coordinator class rule over workers. Coordinators monopolize empowering circumstances, dominate agendas and decisions, and aggrandize themselves (ostensibly but not actually in everyone's interest). Coordinators see workers below as child-like subjects to be ruled and at best aided. Workers do disempowering tasks. They follow agendas others set. They obey orders others issue. They suffer limited incomes. Central planning compels worker subordination not only nationally, but also in each workplace. Central planning subverts our four other postcapitalist aims so we reject central planning. But what about markets? Many anti-capitalists support or at least grudgingly accept markets. Are they right to do so?

First, markets remunerate output and bargaining power instead of only duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued work.

With markets, you get what you have the bargaining power to take, not what is ethically and socially warranted. If I have a relative monopoly on resources, equipment, venues, connections, information, skills, or even inclinations to rule, I have more bargaining power, and I get more. Similarly, if I am white or male and society is racist or sexist, I have more bargaining power and I get more. Markets obliterate equitable remuneration. They enforce grotesque income differentials.

Second, markets force buyers to try to buy cheap and sellers to try to sell dear. Buyers and sellers seek to fleece one another as much as possible to ensure their own advance. With markets, we get ahead at the expense of others, or we get left behind to the benefit of others. We fleece or we be fleeced. Nasty pays. Gouging consumers, dumping waste, and repressing workers' pay. Markets pressure us to be ethically less than who we should be in order to have materially more than we should have. Markets reward anti-sociality and punish solidarity. Nice doesn't pay. With markets we do not cooperatively benefit along with others. We slip slide to anti-sociality.

Third, markets explicitly produce dissatisfaction because only the dissatisfied buy again and again. For example, planned obsolescence makes the consumer dissatisfied with the product he or she already has. As the general director of General Motors' Research Labs, Charles Kettering who regularly introduced model changes for GM cars put it: business needs to create a "dissatisfied consumer"; its mission is "the organized creation of dissatisfaction." Does anyone not feel this in their own lives? Does anyone not see it in "advertising signs that con you into thinking you're the one that can do what's never been done that can win what's never been won"?

Fourth, and of incalculably massive consequence, prices in a market system at best take into account the impact of work and consumption on the immediate buyer and seller—but not their impact on those peripherally affected, including, for example, those affected by pollution or, for that matter, by positive side effects. Only the direct buyer and seller and not those affected at a distance decide market transactions. This means markets routinely violate ecological sustainability and demolish environmental stewardship. They deal with cars, plastics, and everything else in a manner that ignores impact on the environment and on humanity writ large. Markets impose a short-run competitive time horizon and blot out longer run sustainability implications. Markets propel material growth not human well-being. As a result, markets subject all but the wealthiest communities to a collective debit in water, air, sound, and public availabilities. Market exchange despoils ecology and denies life. Markets are a suicide machine.

Fifth, and far less often noticed, markets tend to produce decision-making hierarchy, not self-management. Market-generated disparities in wealth translate into power disparities that in turn multiply income disparities in a snowballing fashion. More, market competition pressures even council-based workplaces to cut costs and grow revenues to retain or enlarge market share, regardless of social and economic harm. It is a little more subtle to see than other incandescently obvious market failings, but to stay afloat against market competition, even workplaces that initially adopt self-managed councils, equitable remuneration, and balanced job complexes, have to increasingly figure out what costs to cut and how to generate more sales to accrue surplus with which to win market share. But who in a self-

managed council of workers would want to, who would agree to, and mostly who would be good at cost-cutting and work intensifying that turns off their own air conditioning, mercilessly speeds up their own work schedules, harshly manipulates consumers, and endlessly dumps garbage on neighbours, even as they all must also work ever harder in their worsening situation?

It turns out that to pursue these and other similarly competitive anti-social paths to winning market share sufficiently to survive, competitive firms will feel great pressure to insulate some employees from the discomfort that cost-cutting and speed-up imposes and to cause them to feel superior to others so that such elevated employees will happily propel competitive cost cutting, speed up, and dumping at others expense. In other words, to cut costs and otherwise impose market discipline, even if a workplace starts with councils and balanced jobs, market logic perverts humane personal motivations and causes a coordinator class to emerge above workers which obliterates self-management and equity and accrues ever more power and income to itself. That is, under the pressure of market competition, any firm I work for must try to maximize its revenues to keep up with competing firms. If my firm doesn't do that, including dumping costs on others, inducing excessive purchases, and speeding up work intensity, then it may flounder and die. So, we try to dump our costs on others. We seek as much revenue as possible, including by inducing excessive consumption. We cut our costs of production as far as we can, including by reducing comforts for workers while unduly intensifying labour. Forget about workplace day-care. Forget about better work conditions. For your own good, say the coordinators to the workers, we must compete. Less loudly they think, for we

coordinators to relentlessly impose all these conditions on you workers, we elevated ones have to not suffer the pains our choices induce. We have to come to think we deserve the better circumstances and income that we give ourselves. We have to come to think you workers deserve the worse that we allow you. We have to protect our circumstances and impose yours. We coordinators look around and come to feel that we rule and we get more because we deserve it. It's who we are. You obey. You get less. That's who you are. So, hurry up and produce. Look anywhere. Look everywhere. It is life and life only—the Amazon way.

It bears repeating. Consider a firm initially committed to self-management and even to balanced job complexes. If it operates in a market context, it has to viciously compete. Its employees' incomes will reflect their bargaining power. Its employees' mindsets will become overwhelmingly self-serving. Market competition will over time impose a necessity to hire some folks with the kind of callous and calculating minds modern business schools produce. Suppose you and I work in a firm with others like us. We are anti-capitalist. Initially, we want self-management and equity. Despite our humane desires, market pressures force our firm to compete. We too compete in our personal transactions. We remain homo competitors. And to compete effectively as a workplace, we give new callous business school bred employees air-conditioned offices and comfortable surroundings. We say to them, "okay, cut our costs to ensure our livelihood." In other words, even in such hopeful change-seeking circumstances, bent out of humane shape by markets, we impose on ourselves a coordinator class. We do this not due to natural law, and not due to some internal psychological drive, but because markets force us to subordinate

ourselves to a coordinator elite so that our workplaces don't lose market share and revenues and eventually go out of business. This flaw of markets, like their more obvious other problems and also like the in-built flaws of the corporate division of labour and, for that matter, of private ownership of productive assets, institutionally subverts our worthy aspirations. We can't just jettison private ownership by capitalists, or even just private ownership by capitalists and monopolization of empowering work by coordinators. For equity. For balanced jobs. For self-management. For solidarity. For ecology. And for classlessness. We must also jettison markets.

Some delusionally or self-servingly reactionary economists will claim we exaggerate. All these market failings are not produced by markets per se, but only by markets that haven't attained a condition of perfect competition. It is a bit like saying that the ills associated with ingesting arsenic occur because we never get pure arsenic, but only arsenic tainted with other ingredients. On the one hand, calling for perfect markets ignores that in a real society there is literally no such thing as frictionless competition, so of course we will always get imperfect markets. On the other hand, and much more important, calling for perfect markets ignores that the harmful effects of markets do not diminish when competition is made more "perfect." Historically, the closer economies come to a pure market system without state intervention, with as few sectors as possible dominated by single firms or groups of firms, and with as few unions as possible, the worse the social implications have been. For example, there have rarely been markets as competitive as those of Britain in the early nineteenth century, yet, under the sway of those nearly perfect markets, young

children routinely suffered early death working long days in the Satanic mills of the time.

Markets do accomplish exchange, but they do not promote humane excellence in any form. Instead, they fiercely facilitate material, cultural, and moral depravity. As a result, to attain an economy able to sustainably deliver equity, solidarity, diversity, and self-management, we have to reject private ownership of productive assets, authoritarian decision making, a corporate division of labour, and remuneration for property, power, or output, and also markets.

This may seem hard to imagine, but if we are serious about our aims, we can't escape the conclusion. We don't reject exchange per se. We don't reject allocation per se. But we do recognize that even without private ownership of means of production, markets (and central planning) subvert our aims. They obliterate equity, annihilate self-management, grossly mis-value products, grotesquely violate the ecology, relentlessly reward anti-sociality, and unavoidably enforce class rule.

In short, like private ownership of productive assets, the corporate division of labour, and inequitable remuneration, markets and central planning violate our aims. And that is why we have to transcend them all.

To round out a new economic vision we therefore have no choice. We must conceive allocation able to efficiently communicate the true individual, social, and ecological costs and benefits of economic options. We must conceive allocation able to give workers and consumers influence over choices proportional to the degree they are affected. We must conceive allocation able to promote solidarity, facilitate

equity, support balanced jobs, husband ecology, and ensure classlessness. Goodbye inequity and class rule. Goodbye markets. Goodbye central planning. What else can you show me?

It is a daunting question but to not answer will ensure that we fall back on markets or central planning, which will subvert all else we seek.

We must answer.

Participatory Planning

Our new approach to allocation has to determine the true personal, social, and ecological costs and benefits of economic activities. It has to facilitate workers and consumers using those true measures to settle on production and consumption inputs and outputs. But what does the phrase “true social costs and benefits” even mean?

Suppose we make a car or violin. What does it cost? What are its benefits? We need to answer because if we don't know the full costs of producing the car or violin and we don't know the full benefits (and also costs) of its later consumption, how can we decide if it is a good idea to make the car or violin instead of making something else with the labour, tools, resources, and intermediate goods required—for example, instead of making more public transport, or making more guitars, or, for that matter, making more schools or more cherry pies? Likewise, if we don't know their full costs and benefits, how can we decide if we want more or fewer cars or violins?

One thing to note is that “true social costs and benefits” should account for implications well beyond those that current owners of automobile or violin plants account for. Current owners want to maximize

profits while retaining the means to accrue those profits to themselves. Current owners do not seek societal wellbeing, worker well-being, or planetary well-being. Information about all that is not on their agenda. Their notion of efficiency takes no account of benefit or cost to society, workers, or the planet. Their position as owners and market competitors means they seek profits or they are replaced. The only information they care about is what bears on seeking profits. Owner's lives embody profit seeking. Owners feel assaults on profit seeking as assaults on their lives. Accounting in a market system tracks charges for inputs, output per hour, and revenues from sales, but it ignores worker pleasure and pain and environmental clean-up and degradation.

For a worthy postcapitalism, we should want all actors to pursue solidarity, equity, and self-management. We should want economic activity to meet the needs and develop the potentials of workers, consumers, and bystanders. Consider making cars. We should want car workers' roles to propel car workers to account for their own well-being, and also for consumers', neighbours', society's, and the planet's well-being. And we should want car workers' circumstances to provide them the information and skills needed to successfully pursue those concerns.

Currently, owners of automobile plants take into account the amount they have to pay to get steel, tires, technologies, housing, and electricity, and the wages they have to pay—and finally, also, any significant threats to their ability to keep grabbing their preferred giant share of revenues. Owners pay attention, that is, to what affects their narrow market-imposed agenda, which is profit seeking. And, short of resisting, current workers lack sufficient opportunity and

information to pay informed attention to anything other than orders delivered and means to obey them.

In contrast, without owners, we should want all car workers and consumers to take into account the costs of producing, transporting, and consuming cars including positive and adverse impacts on workers, consumers, bystanders, communities, and the environment. It follows that what we mean by true social costs and benefits should be an accurate measure of the personal, social, and ecological gains and losses associated with the production and consumption of a car or of any other product, including effects on social relations, effects on the material, moral and psychological condition of workers, and effects on communities, consumers, and the environment.

Worthy allocation should therefore allocate resources, labour, and the products of labour in a flexible manner that takes into account all these factors and is also able to realign in case of unexpected crises or shocks.

Worthy allocation should not homogenize tastes. It should abide and even promote diverse preferences even as it preserves privacy and socially informed individuality.

Worthy allocation should not pit actors against one another as competing buyers and sellers or class antagonists. It should engender sociality and solidarity.

Worthy allocation should operate without class division and class rule. It should facilitate equity and classlessness as it meets the needs and develops the capacities of all workers and consumers.

Worthy allocation should operate without authoritarian or even disproportionate influence for a few people. It should foster self-management for all.

And finally, in deciding what to do with any particular asset—whether it is people's labour, a resource like oil, or a tool like communications technology—worthy allocation should take into account the true and full personal, social, and environmental effects of contending choices. It should attain ends we seek without wasting means we value.

To simultaneously accord decision-making influence to all who are involved in proportion as they are affected is clearly no little ambition given that every economic decision affects virtually everyone to at least some degree. Thus, in any institution—whether a factory, university, health centre, or whatever—many interests need to be appropriately represented in decision-making. There is the workforce itself, obviously affected by their actions each day. Does their work exhaust and deaden or uplift and inspire them? There is the community in which the workplace is located. Is it polluted, or is it respected and socially enriched? There are the users of the produced products or services. Do they benefit from what they receive, or do they lose because labour and inputs were not put to a different use that they would have preferred? For example, if society is making cars instead of public transport, I may gain from having a car, but I may lose more due to the lack of public transport. If society is making tanks and missiles, I may be told I am gaining safety and bad guys are being weakened, but I will certainly lose due to gargantuan productive capacity going to war and waste instead of to schools, hospitals, housing, parks, and infrastructure.

We know that to have self-management of economic life, new institutions must replace owners. But we also know new institutions must not hand the disproportionate influence and distorted motives that private owners now hold, to a class of new coordinators who still dominate workers.

More positively, we know we need institutions that deliver to each economic actor a degree of influence proportional to the degree they are affected by such matters as how much of any given product is produced, how it is produced, how it is valued, and what income each person gets, and therefore how much each person can consume from the social product.

We not only need self-managed workers and consumers councils, we also need allocation connections between workers and consumers councils that preserve and enhance informed, insightful, self-managed decisions and that augment rather than subvert equitable remuneration, balanced job complexes, and self-management for both workers and consumers. That said, we can now ask, what actual allocation institutions can accomplish these aims? What can we say here, in a relatively short essay, by way of getting into this complex issue? Not central planning. Not markets. What then, instead?

Suppose in place of top-down allocation via centrally planned authoritative choices, and in place of competitive market allocation by atomized competing buyers and sellers, we could arrive at informed, self-managed, cooperatively determined inputs and outputs by way of socially interconnected actors. And suppose each of these interconnected actors could have influence over negotiations in proportion as choices affect them. And suppose each could have accurate full social

and environmental costs and benefits to assess, and they could each have appropriate training, confidence, current conditions, and current motivation to accurately develop, communicate, and express their preferences. I hope we can agree that if we could conceive institutions able to make all that real, we would have worthy allocation.

In participatory planning, if participatory planning is all we hope for it to be, worker and consumer councils will freely propose their work and consumption preferences in light of continually updated knowledge of the personal, local, national, and ecological implications of their choices. But what might that look like?

Workers and consumers via their councils initially cooperatively propose their own workplace and consumer inputs and outputs. They consult their prior year's activity and prices. They consult predicted prices for the coming year. They arrive at proposals that convey their initial preferences. They receive back accountings of other's proposals arrived at in other councils. They engage in a back and forth process where in each new round they use others' proposals and updated guesses as to what final prices for the current year will be, to refine their own proposals. In each round, that is, they receive new information based on other's proposals. They then refine their proposals for their own production or consumption until arriving at a plan to implement. To facilitate all this they use additional features of participatory planning whose details continually evolve based on experiences of what best helps people express and refine their desires in light of feedback about other people's desires.

In my workers council, initially I propose we should do such and such. You are in the same council and you propose we should do so

and so. Our workers council deliberates and collectively settles on an initial overarching proposal indicating what we collectively wish to produce. Consumers and other producers do essentially the same thing. We and everyone then learn what other councils have initially proposed. Then they, and we, alter and resubmit our proposals in light of the new information we have received. We all operate in light of our need to balance a personally fulfilling and socially responsible pattern of our work and our consumption with the requirements of a viable overall plan.

Each participant in this process—both as a worker and as a consumer—seeks personal and collective council well-being and development. However, because of a whole array of associated institutions, and especially because of equitable remuneration and balanced job complexes, each participant can improve his or her own situation only by acting in accord with or at least not violating more general social benefit.

I gain by improvements in social output. Everybody else gains from that as well. I gain by improvements in the quality and circumstances of balanced work. Everybody else gains from that as well. I can also gain by choosing to work somewhat longer or less long myself, for example, depending on my preference for leisure or for income—and, if agreed to by my work mates, and if my work is socially valued, my pursuing that choice won't hurt anyone else.

When workers and consumers express their individual and collective preferences and hear back the sums and averages of proposals from all across the economy, as well as receive updated estimates of what will wind up relative prices of everything they use or want, the

new information leads them to make new proposals in a sequence of cooperatively updated refinements, until settling on a plan.

As in any economy, for consumers to propose what they want for their share of the social product, they must take into account their expected income (which in our postcapitalism is proportional to the duration, intensity, and onerousness of their socially valued labour, or is, if they can't work, the societal average income) and they must also take into account the expected relative costs of available products as conveyed by the participatory planning process. This occurs for individuals deciding personal consumption, and also for households, communes, neighbourhoods, and regions deciding collective consumption. And all this is carried out through consumer councils whose proposals, taken together, sum to the cumulative demand for society's final consumer goods and services. The trajectory of consumer proposals from initial to final reflects consumer desires in context of their budgets and ever more accurate estimates of final prices.

Workers in their workplace councils similarly indicate how much work they wish to do in light of overall requests for their product, as well as in light of their own labour/leisure preferences. The trajectory of their proposals from initial to final reflects their desires in context of ever more accurate estimates of final prices and their responsibility to use productive assets responsibly lest their work is less than fully socially responsible. The proposals of workers in each firm sum to industry and societal proposed output. While workplace proposals are collective for the whole workplace, they are arrived at with input from each individual in the workplace.

Both proposed supply from workers and proposed demand by consumers are refined, each in light of the other, and in light of continually refined valuations or “indicative prices” during the multi-round, or multi-iteration planning process. This trajectory of revisions finally establishes true social and ecological costs and benefits.

In a participatory economy, it is important to note that no one would have any interest in selling products at inflated prices or in selling more items than consumers actually need, because imposing high prices and inducing purchases beyond what will fulfil people will not increase anyone’s personal income. Income depends, instead, on duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued (not unwanted, wasteful or unproductive) labour and not on output or revenues. That is, even if a workforce in some workplace could somehow use some sort of manipulative technique to trick consumers into buying more than they could really benefit from, the income of each of its workers would not thereby climb since income doesn’t depend on overall volume or value of sales. On the other hand, producing too little or too poorly or too wastefully for the work to all be socially valuable given the labour and resources involved would diminish each worker’s income. We therefore have reason to efficiently meet needs and utilize and develop potentials, but not to do other than that.

Why would I want to produce something—applying my time and energy—that wasn’t actually going to benefit folks? I wouldn’t, not in a participatory economic institutional setting where there is nothing gained, only losses, from such behaviour. Nor is there any need for firms to compete for market share. Individuals and units do not advance by way of beating out others in such a manner. More, of course when a workplace needs less workers than in its past, the newly

unemployed keep receiving their income while getting new work. In short, economic motives would simply be to meet needs and to develop potentials at whatever level turns out to be preferred in light of all costs and benefits, all without wasting assets.

Workers would seek to produce what is socially valuable and useful while compatibly and cooperatively fulfilling their own as well as the rest of society's preferences. And this would be true not because workers are suddenly saints, but because with sensible institutions, cooperation would benefit everyone and waste would harm everyone.

Merciless fleeing, indeed fleeing of any degree, would have no place in the participatory economy because there is neither means to do it, nor gains to be had from doing it, much less pressure to do it or suffer. Even theft would make little material sense because if you stole to any significant degree, you would have to enjoy it in your basement, since with equitable incomes no one could ostentatiously consume way beyond average other than due to theft, so ostentatiously consuming would broadcast that you are a thief.

For example, suppose you are a famous and really, really excellent tennis player. Society likes watching and you like playing high quality tennis, so you are on the pro tour. You have a balanced job complex, of course, since everyone who works does. And you get income for the duration, intensity, and onerousness of your socially valued work, like everyone. So, your income is perhaps average for society, or maybe it is somewhat more or less than average depending on your preference for more income or more leisure. But wait, you are so good at tennis that a lot of people would love to play a set or two with you. You could give lessons, legitimately, but given your incredible talent, you want

to earn lots more. So, you decide to augment your income by selling play dates to people on the sly at a very, very high price per hour. Can you do that, and will you in fact want to?

Well, to do it you would have to violate the norms of your economy by operating outside the purview of councils. You would (depending on some details) likely also have to get your payment in kind, meaning the people wanting to play with you can't give you cash, but have to give you stuff they have gotten for their income. And there is another more interesting obstacle. That is, suppose you do it. And suppose you get tons of stuff. What do you do with your bounty? You can't enjoy it in public because there is no legitimate way to have accumulated so much stuff. In current economies, people who rip off can live ostentatiously without real difficulty. In an equitable society, you would have to enjoy your bounty in your cellar because to enjoy it in public would immediately reveal that you have gotten it by violating norms, since there is no legitimate way to get such excessive income. And there is even more. Where do you get all the tennis balls needed? And the courts to play on? The tennis councils are not going to allot it for anti-social behaviour.

Without belabouring unduly, beyond the bare outline of key features we have been presenting, this example offers a brief look into a particular unplanned implication of participatory planning and participatory economic operations. And there are many more such positive implications.

But let's get back to the characteristics of our hoped for participatory planning. Workers and consumers, separately and collectively, utilize various communicative mechanisms developed for the purpose

to communicate their proposals for desired production and consumption. Cooperative refinement of their proposals into a shared overall plan in turn occurs via a series of planning rounds or iterations. Every individual and collective is responsible for making their own proposals. In doing so, every participant has an interest in effectively utilizing productive potentials to meet needs, because everyone gets an equitable share of the overall social output.

Imagine a population. It produces all sorts of stuff that sums to what we call the social product. Each person can get what turns out to be an average share of that product, say, or can arrange to work longer, or harder, or under worse conditions than average, due to wanting a little more income even at the cost of some extra effort, or, conversely, can arrange to work a little less long, or less hard, or at better conditions, due to wanting to exert a bit less, even at the cost of receiving a little less income. For all who work, the effort we contribute and the associated income we get are connected. They together determine the combined benefit and cost to us of what we do and what we receive, with that sum being effectively the same for everyone. This hypothetical population is exactly the working population of our revolutionized economy.

Every participant would have an interest in most effectively utilizing productive potentials to meet needs, because everyone would get an equitable share of the overall social output. When the total rises, my piece of the total rises, like everyone else's piece.

Each person would also favour workplaces—and all of society—making investments that reduce drudge work and that improve the quality of society's average balanced job complex, because that is the

job quality that everyone, on average, enjoys. The logic is the same as for income—our interests entwine. We all want society's balanced job complex to grow steadily more desirable, because we all do our economic activity in a balanced job complex.

We have suggested that participatory allocation continually updates and refines plans for economic production and consumption during the course of each year. Tastes change. Crises arise. Innovations occur. Of course, that doesn't say there would be no errors or imperfections in the day-to-day and year-to-year outcomes of a participatory economy. But it does say that with continual updates, and with shared equitable circumstances, such deviations from ideal choices would arise from ignorance or mistakes but not from the system's logic. Such deviations would not snowball into permanent inequities.

Participatory planning won't propel accumulation and won't push for constant increases in effort. It won't bias against public goods, won't under assess the importance of ecological impacts, and won't ignore the social costs of economic choices. The system won't divide actors into a class of dominant coordinators and a class of subordinate workers with opposed interests.

With participatory allocation—albeit we have here discussed it in only a very cursory way—assume the vision's features can be filled out so that in no way could one sector systematically benefit at the cost of other sectors. Not by race, gender, or class.

To gain at the expense of others goes from being the aim of economic activity to being a virtual impossibility for economic activity. Everyone is treated according to the same norms which privilege none

above others. Mistaken choices and deviations much less in-built tendencies don't continually benefit some in a ruling class or even a privileged community to the detriment of others.

In another aspect of allocation, to choose what role and position to occupy in a participatory workplace, each person would consult his or her own personal tastes and talents. Of course, each person would be better suited and more likely to be happy at some pursuits than at others. Maybe I am more technical. You are more verbal. I like indoors. You like outdoors. I prefer to calculate or construct. You prefer to design or cook. Each person's job search would be about meeting personal preferences equitably. No choice that one could individually make—or that a group could collectively make—would accrue what other members of society would deem unjust power, wealth, or circumstance.

I have painted a very pretty picture. But my comments here, like in prior essays in this series, offer only a succinct account. So, I repeat: For those who would like to explore further there are books, videos, debates, and especially two recent full-length presentations of participatory economics which include extensive discussion of participatory planning as well as of participatory economy's other defining features. My offering is titled *No Bosses: A New Economy for a Better World*.³ It is written for anyone interested in postcapitalist possibilities. Robin Hahnel's offering is titled *Democratic Economic Planning*.⁴ It is written

³ Michael Albert, *No Bosses: A New Economy for a Better World* (Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: John Hunt Publishing | zero Books, 2021).

⁴ Robin Hahnel, *Democratic Economic Planning* (Routledge Frontiers of Political Economy; London, New York: Routledge, 2021).

for economists and it directly addresses their more technical concerns and arguments.

The bottom line is this. Participatory institutions propel us to freely be whoever we wish to be consistent with everyone else being equally free. My well-being becomes a condition for your well-being. Your well-being becomes a condition for mine. That is participatory economics and participatory society. Do we want that? Or do we want poverty and hardship for most, gilded cages for some, and a slip slide to moral and ecological oblivion for everyone?

méta Working Papers

The Centre for Postcapitalist Civilisation's working papers series, méta Working Papers, publishes peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research that explicitly or implicitly explores aspects of our liminal times, of our transition towards postcapitalist futures — be they dystopian or utopian, or anything in between. We are particularly interested in the exposure of academic works-in-progress to an audience of postcapitalism-oriented thinkers.

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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