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Marxism

The Only Viable Economy

- Features -

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1. Once upon a time the capitalist mode of production represented a great advance over all of the preceding ones, however problematical and indeed destructive this historical advance in the end turned out to be. By *breaking* the long prevailing but constraining direct link between human use and production, and replacing it with the *commodity relation*, capital opened up the dynamically unfolding possibilities of apparently irresistible *expansion* to which—“from the standpoint of the capital system and of its willing personifications”—there could be no conceivable limits. For the paradoxical and ultimately quite untenable inner determination of capital’s productive system is that its commodified products “*are non-use-values for their owners and use-values for their non-owners. Consequently they must all change hands.... Hence commodities must be realised as values before they can be realised as use-values.*” [2]

This self-contradictory inner determination of the system, which imposes the ruthless submission of human need to the alienating necessity of capital expansion, is what removes the possibility of overall rational control from this dynamic productive order. It brings with itself perilous and potentially catastrophic consequences in the longer run, transforming in due course a great *positive power* of earlier quite unimaginable economic development into a *devastating negativity*, in the total absence of the necessary reproductive restraint.

What is systematically ignored—and must be ignored, due to the unalterable fetishistic imperatives and vested interests of the capital system itself—is the fact that, inescapably, we live in a *finite world*, with its literally vital *objective limits*. For a long time in human history, including several centuries of capitalistic developments, those limits could be—as indeed they were—ignored with relative safety. Once, however, they assert themselves, as they emphatically must do in our irreversible historical epoch, no irrational and wasteful productive system, no matter how dynamic (in fact the more dynamic the worse) can escape the consequences. It can only disregard them for a while through reorienting itself toward the callous justification of the more or less openly destructive imperative of the system’s self-preservation at all cost: by preaching the wisdom of “there is no alternative,” and in that spirit brushing aside and, whenever need be, brutally suppressing even the most obvious warning signs that foreshadow the unsustainable future.

False theorization is the necessary consequence of this lopsided objective structural determination and domination of use value by exchange value not only under the most absurdly and blindly apologetic conditions of contemporary capitalism but also in the classical period of bourgeois political economy, at the time of the capital system’s historical ascendancy. This is because under the rule of capital a *fictitiously limitless* production must be pursued at all cost, as well as theoretically justified as the only commendable one. Such pursuit is imperative even if there can be no guarantee whatsoever that: (1) the required and sustainable “changing of hands” of the supplied commodities will actually take place on the idealized market (thanks to the mysterious benevolence of Adam Smith’s even more mysterious “invisible hand”); and (2) that the objective material conditions for producing the projected unlimited—and humanly unlimitable, since in its primary determination divorced from need and use—supply of commodities can be *forever secured*, irrespective of the destructive impact of capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction on nature.

The ideal suitability of the market for rectifying the unalterable structural defect indicated in point (1) above is a *gratuitous afterthought*, bringing with it many arbitrary assumptions and unfulfillable regulative projections in the

same vein. The sobering reality underlying the market as a remedial afterthought is a set of insuperably adversarial power relations, tending to monopolistic domination and to the intensification of the system's antagonisms. Likewise, the grave structural defect of pursuing unlimited capital expansion—idealizing all-important “growth” as an end in itself—as put into relief in point (2) above, is complemented by an equally *fictitious afterthought* when it has to be admitted that some remedy might be in order. And the remedy thus projected—as an alternative to the system's collapse into the unredeemable negativity of the fateful “*stationary state*” theorized by bourgeois political economy in the nineteenth century—is simply the wishful advocacy of making *distribution* “more equitable” (and thereby less conflict-torn) while leaving the production system as it stands. This postulate, even if it could be implemented, which of course it cannot be, due to the fundamental hierarchical structural determinations of capital's social order itself, would not be able to solve any of the grave problems of *production* on which *also* the insurmountable contradictions of the capital system's incurable distribution are erected.

One of the principal representatives of liberal thought, John Stuart Mill, is as genuine in his concern about the “stationary state” of the future as he is hopelessly unreal in his proposed remedy to it. For he can only offer vacuous hope in his discussion of this problem which happens to be absolutely intractable from the standpoint of capital. He writes that “I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be *content to be stationary*, long before necessity compels them to it.” [3] In this way Mill's discourse amounts to no more than paternalistic preaching, because he can only acknowledge, in tune with his acceptance of the Malthusian diagnosis, the difficulties arising from population growth, but none of the contradictions of capital's reproductive order. His bourgeois self-complacency is clearly visible, depriving his analysis and paternalistic reforming intent of all substance. Mill peremptorily asserts that “It is only in the *backward countries of the world* that increased production is still an important object: in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a *better distribution*, of which one indispensable means is a *stricter restraint on population*.” [4] Even his idea of “better distribution” is hopelessly unreal. For what Mill cannot possibly recognize (or acknowledge) is that the overwhelmingly important aspect of distribution is the untouchable exclusive distribution of the means of production to the capitalist class. Understandably, therefore, on such a self-serving operational premise of the social order a paternalist sense of superiority remains always prevalent in this that no solution can be expected “until *the better minds* succeeded in educating the others,” [5] so that they accept population restraint and a “better distribution” supposedly arising from such restraint. Thus people should forget all about changing the destructive structural determinations of the established social metabolic order which inexorably drive society toward a stagnating stationary state. In Mill's discourse the utopia of the capitalist millennium, with its *tenable stationary state*, will be brought into existence thanks to the good services of the enlightened liberal “better minds.” And then, as far as the structural determinations of the established social reproductive order are concerned, everything can go on forever as before.

All this made some sense from capital's standpoint, however problematical and ultimately untenable that sense in the end had to turn out to be, due to the dramatic onset and relentless deepening of the system's structural crisis. But even that partial sense of the same wishful propositions could not be ascribed to the reformist political movement which claimed to represent the strategic interests of labor. Yet, social-democratic reformism at its inception took its inspiration from such naive, even if at first genuinely held, afterthoughts of liberal political economy. Thus, due to the internal logic of the adopted social premises, emanating from capital's standpoint and vested interests as the unchallengeable controller of the reproductive metabolism, it could not be surprising in the least that social-democratic reformism ended its course of development the way in which it actually did: by transforming itself into “New Labor” (in Britain; and its equivalents in other countries) and by abandoning completely any concern with even the most limited reform of the established social order. At the same time, in place of genuine liberalism the most savage and inhuman varieties of *neoliberalism* appeared on the historical stage, wiping out the memory of the once advocated social remedies—including even the wishful paternalistic solutions—from the progressive past of the liberal creed. And as a bitter irony of contemporary historical development, the “New Labor”—type former social-democratic reformist movements installed in government—not only in Britain but also everywhere else in the “advanced” and not so advanced capitalist world—did not hesitate to unreservedly identify themselves with the aggressive neoliberal phase of capital-apologetics. This capitulatory transformation clearly marked the end of the reformist road which was a blind alley from the outset.

2. In order to create an economically viable, and also on a long-term basis historically sustainable, social reproductive order it is necessary to radically alter the self-contradictory inner determinations of the established one, which impose the ruthless submission of human need and use to the alienating necessity of capital expansion. This means that the absurd precondition of the ruling productive system—whereby use values, by preordained and totally iniquitous ownership determinations, must be divorced from, and opposed to, those who create them, so as to bring about and circularly/arbitrarily legitimate capital's enlarged self-realization—has to be permanently relegated to the past. Otherwise the only viable meaning of *economy* as rational *economizing* with the available, necessarily finite, resources cannot be instituted and respected as a vital orienting principle. Instead, irresponsible *wastefulness* dominates in capital's socioeconomic—and corresponding political—order which invariably reasserts itself as *institutionalized irresponsibility*, notwithstanding its self-mythology of absolutely insuperable “efficiency.” (To be sure, the kind of “efficiency” glorified in this way is in fact capital's ultimately self-undermining efficiency for blindly driving forward the adversarial/conflictual parts at the incorrigible expense of the *whole*.) Understandably, therefore, the governmentally well-promoted fantasies of “market socialism” had to fizzle out in the form of a humiliating collapse, due to the acceptance of such presuppositions and capitalistically insuperable structural determinations.

The now dominant conception of the “economy,” which happens to be quite incapable of setting limits even to the most grievous waste, in our time truly on a *planetary scale*, can only operate with self-serving *tautologies* and arbitrarily prefabricated, as well as simultaneously dismissed, *false oppositions and pseudo-alternatives*, devised for the same purpose of unjustifiable self-justification. As a blatant—and dangerously all-infecting—tautology, we are offered the arbitrary definition of *productivity as growth, and growth as productivity*, although both terms would require a historically qualified and objectively sustainable evaluation of their own.

Naturally, the reason why the obvious tautological fallacy is much preferable to the required proper theoretical and practical assessment is that by arbitrarily decreeing the *identity* of these two key terms of reference of the capital system the *self-evident validity and timeless superiority* of an extremely problematical—and ultimately even self-destructive—social reproductive order should look not only plausible but absolutely unquestionable. At the same time, the arbitrarily decreed *tautological identity* of growth and productivity is shored up by the equally arbitrary and self-serving false alternative between “*growth or no-growth*.” Moreover, the latter is automatically prejudged in favor of capitalistically postulated and defined “*growth*.” It is projected and defined with fetishistic quantification, as befits its way of *presupposing forever*, as self-commendingly *synonymous to growth itself*, nothing more specific and humanly meaningful than the abstract genericity of enlarged *capital-expansion* as the elementary *precondition* for satisfying human need and use.

That is where the incorrigible divorce of capitalistic growth from human need and use—indeed its potentially most devastating and destructive *counter-position* to human need—betrays itself. Once the fetishistic mystifications and arbitrary postulates at the root of the categorically decreed false identity of *growth and productivity* are peeled away, it becomes abundantly clear that the kind of growth postulated and at the same time automatically exempted from all critical scrutiny is in no way inherently connected with sustainable objectives corresponding to human need. The only connection that must be asserted and defended at all cost in capital's social metabolic universe is the *false identity* of—aprioristically presupposed—*capital expansion* and circularly corresponding (but in truth likewise aprioristically presupposed) “*growth*,” whatever might be the consequences imposed on nature and humankind by even the most destructive type of growth. For capital's real concern can only be its own *ever enlarged expansion*, even if that brings with it the destruction of humanity.

In this vision even the most lethal *cancerous growth* must preserve its conceptual primacy over (against) human need and use, if human need by any chance happens to be mentioned at all. And when the apologists of the capital system are willing to consider *The Limits to Growth*, [6] as the “Club of Rome” did in its vastly propagandized capital-apologetic venture in the early 1970s, the aim inevitably remains the *eternalization of the existing grave inequalities* [7] by fictitiously (and quixotically) freezing global capitalist production at a totally untenable level, blaming primarily “*population growth*” (as customary in bourgeois political economy ever since Malthus) for the

existing problems. Compared to such callous hypocritical “remedial intent,” rhetorically pretending to be concerned with nothing less than “the Predicament of Mankind,” Mill’s earlier quoted paternalistic preaching, with its genuine advocacy of somewhat more equitable distribution than what he was familiar with, was the paradigm of radical enlightenment.

The characteristically self-serving false alternative of “growth or no growth” is evident even if we only consider what would be the unavoidable impact of the postulated “no growth” on the grave conditions of inequality and suffering in capital’s social order. It would mean the *permanent condemnation* of humanity’s overwhelming majority to the inhuman conditions which they are now forced to endure. For they are now in a literal sense forced to endure them, by their thousands of millions, when there could be *created* a real alternative to it. Under conditions, that is, when it would be quite feasible to rectify at least the worst effects of global deprivation: by putting to humanly commendable and rewarding use the attained *potential* of productivity, in a world of now criminally wasted material and human resources.

3. To be sure, we can only speak of the positive *potential of productivity*, and not of its existing reality, as often predicated, with green-colored good intentions but boundless illusions, by old fashioned single-issue reformers, wishfully asserting that we could do it “right now,” with the productive powers at our disposal today, if we really decided to do so. Unfortunately, however, such a conception completely ignores the way in which our productive system is presently articulated, requiring in the future a radical rearticulation. For productivity wedded to *capitalist* growth, in the form of the now dominant reality of *destructive production*, is a most forbidding adversary. In order to turn the positive potentiality of productive development into a much needed reality, so as to be able to rectify many of the crying inequalities and injustices of our existing society, it would be necessary to adopt the *regulative principles* of a *qualitatively different* social order. In other words, humanity’s now destructively negated *potential of productivity* would have to be liberated from its capitalist integument in order to become socially viable *productive power*.

The quixotic advocacy of freezing production at the level attained in the early 1970s was trying to camouflage, with vacuous pseudo-scientific model-mongering pioneered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the ruthlessly enforced actual power relations of U.S. dominated postwar imperialism. That variety of imperialism was, of course, very different from its earlier form known to Lenin. For in Lenin’s lifetime at least half a dozen significant imperialist powers were competing for the rewards of their real and/or hoped for conquests. And even in the 1930s Hitler was still willing to share the fruits of violently redefined imperialism with Japan and Mussolini’s Italy. In our time, by contrast, we have to face up to the reality “and the lethal dangers” arising from *global hegemonic imperialism*, with the United States as its overwhelmingly dominant power. [8] In contrast to even Hitler, the United States as the *single hegemon* is quite unwilling to share global domination with any rival. And that is not simply on account of political/military contingencies. The problems are much deeper. They assert themselves through the ever-aggravating contradictions of the capital system’s deepening *structural crisis*. U.S. dominated global hegemonic imperialism is an “ultimately futile” attempt to devise a solution to that crisis through the most brutal and violent rule over the rest of the world, enforced with or without the help of slavishly “willing allies,” now through a succession of genocidal wars. Ever since the 1970s the United States has been sinking ever deeper into *catastrophic indebtedness*. The fantasy solution publicly proclaimed by several U.S. presidents was “to grow out of it.” And the result: the diametrical opposite, in the form of astronomical and still growing indebtedness. Accordingly, the United States must grab to itself, by any means at its disposal, including the most violent military aggression, whenever required for this purpose, everything it can, through the transfer of the fruits of capitalist growth “thanks to the global socioeconomic and political/military domination of the United States” from everywhere in the world. Could then any sane person imagine, no matter how well armored by his or her callous contempt for “the shibboleth of equality,” that U.S. dominated global hegemonic imperialism would take seriously even for a moment the panacea of “no growth”? Only the worst kind of bad faith could suggest such ideas, no matter how pretentiously packaged in the hypocritical concern over “the Predicament of Mankind.”

For a variety of reasons there can be no question about the importance of growth both in the present and in the

future. But to say so must go with a proper examination of the concept of growth not only as we know it up to the present, but also as we can envisage its sustainability in the future. Our siding with the need for growth cannot be in favor of *unqualified growth*. The tendentiously avoided real question is: *what kind of growth* is both feasible today, in contrast to dangerously wasteful and even crippling capitalist growth visible all around us? For growth must be also *positively sustainable* in the future on a *long-term* basis.

As mentioned already, capitalist growth is fatefully dominated by the inescapable confines of *fetishistic quantification*. Ever-aggravating *wastefulness* is a necessary corollary of such fetishism, since there can be no criteria—and no viable *measure*—through the observance of which wastefulness could be corrected. More or less arbitrary *quantification* sets the context, creating at the same time also the illusion that once the required quantities are secured for the more powerful, there can be no further significant problems. Yet the truth of the matter is that self-oriented *quantification* in reality cannot be sustained at all as a form of productively viable strategy even in the short run. For it is partial and myopic (if not altogether blind), concerned only with quantities corresponding to the *immediate obstacles* hindering the accomplishment of a given productive task, but not with the necessarily associated *structural limits* of the socioeconomic enterprise itself which—whether you know it or not—ultimately decide everything. The capitalistically necessary confusion of *structural limits* with *obstacles* (which can be quantitatively overcome), in order to ignore the limits (since they correspond to the insurmountable determinations of capital's social metabolic order), vitiates the growth orientation of the entire productive system. To make growth viable would require applying to it profoundly *qualitative* considerations. But that is absolutely prevented by the unquestioning and unquestionable *self-expansionary drive* of capital at all cost, which is incompatible with the *constraining* consideration of *quality* and *limits*.

The great innovation of the capital system is that it can operate—*undialectically*—through the overwhelming domination of quantity: by subsuming *everything*, including living human labor (inseparable from the qualities of human need and use) under *abstract quantitative determinations*, in the form of value and exchange value. Thus everything becomes profitably commensurable and manageable for a determinate period of time. This is the secret of capital's—*for a long time irresistible*—sociohistorical triumph. But it is also the harbinger of its ultimate unsustainability and necessary implosion, once the *absolute limits* of the system are fully activated, as they increasingly happen to be in our own historical epoch. Ours is the time when the undialectical domination of quality by quantity becomes dangerous and untenable.

For it is inconceivable to ignore in our time the fundamental, but under capitalism necessarily sidelined inherent connection of *economy as economizing* (which equals *responsible husbandry*). We have now arrived at a critical point in history when the ruling productive system's willing personifications do everything in their power to wipe out all awareness of that vital objective connection—opting for undeniable destructiveness, not only in the cult of extremely wasteful productive practices, but even glorifying their lethally destructive engagement in unlimited “preventive and preemptive wars.”

Quality, by its very nature, is inseparable from *specificities*. Accordingly, a social metabolic system respectful of quality—above all of the needs of living human beings as its producing subjects—cannot be hierarchically regimented. A radically different kind of socioeconomic and cultural management is required for a society operated on the basis of such a qualitatively different reproductive metabolism, briefly summed up as *self-management*. Regimentation was both feasible and necessary for capital's social metabolic order. In fact the command structure of capital could not function in any other way. Structurally secured hierarchy and authoritarian regimentation are the defining characteristics of capital's command structure. The alternative order is incompatible with regimentation and with the kind of accountancy—including the strictly quantitative operation of *necessary labor time*—which must prevail in the capital system. Thus, the *kind of growth* necessary and feasible in the alternative social metabolic order can only be based on *quality* directly corresponding to *human needs*: the actual and historically developing needs of both society as a whole and of its particular individuals.

At the same time, the alternative to the restrictive and fetishistic time-accountancy of *necessary labor time* can only be the liberating and emancipating *disposable time* consciously offered and managed by the social individuals themselves. That kind of social metabolic control of the available human and material resources would—and actually could—respect both the overall limits arising from the orienting principle of economy as economizing; and at the same time it would also consciously expand such qualitative limits and needs as the historically developing conditions safely permitted. After all, we should not forget that “the first historical act was the creation of a new need” (Marx). Only capital’s reckless way of treating the economy—not as rational economizing but as the most irresponsible legitimization of boundless waste—is what *totally perverts* this historical process: by substituting for the rich diversity of human needs capital’s alienating one-and-only real need for enlarged self-reproduction at all cost, thereby threatening to bring to an end human history itself.

4. There can be not even *partial correctives* introduced into capital’s operational framework if they are genuinely quality-oriented. For the only qualities relevant in this respect are not some abstract physical characteristics but the *humanly meaningful qualities inseparable from need*. It is true, of course, as stressed before, that such qualities are always specific, corresponding to clearly identifiable particular human needs both of the individuals themselves and of their historically given and changing social relations. Accordingly, in their many sided specificity they constitute a *coherent and well defined set* of inviolable systemic determinations, with their own *systemic limits*. It is precisely the existence of such—very far from abstract—systemic limits which makes it impossible to transfer any meaningful operating determinations and orienting principles from the envisaged alternative social metabolic order into the capital system. The two systems are radically exclusive of each other. For the specific qualities corresponding to human need, in the alternative order, carry the indelible marks of their overall systemic determinations, as integral parts of a humanly valid social reproductive system of control. In the capital system, on the contrary, the overall determinations must be unalterably *abstract*, because capital’s *value relation* must reduce all qualities (corresponding to need and use) to measurable generic quantities, in order to assert its alienating historical dominance over everything, in the interest of capital expansion, irrespective of the consequences.

The incompatibilities of the two systems become amply clear when we consider their relationship to the question of *limit itself*. The only sustainable *growth* positively promoted under the alternative social metabolic control is based on the *conscious acceptance of the limits* whose violation would imperil the realization of the chosen—and humanly valid—reproductive objectives. Hence *wastefulness* and *destructiveness* (as clearly identified limiting concepts) are *absolutely excluded* by the consciously accepted systemic determinations themselves, adopted by the social individuals as their vital orienting principles. By contrast, the capital system is characterized, and fatefully driven, by the—conscious or unconscious—*rejection of all limits, including its own systemic limits*. Even the latter are arbitrarily and dangerously treated as if they were nothing more than always superable *contingent obstacles*. Hence anything goes in this social reproductive system, including the possibility—and by the time we have reached our own historical epoch also the overwhelming grave probability—of *total destruction*.

Naturally, this mutually exclusive relationship to the question of limits prevails also the other way round. Thus, there can be no “partial correctives” borrowed from the capital system when creating and strengthening the alternative social metabolic order. The partial—not to mention general—incompatibilities of the two systems arise from the *radical incompatibility of their value dimension*. As mentioned above, this is why the particular value determinations and relations of the alternative order could not be transferred into capital’s social metabolic framework for the purpose of improving it, as postulated by some utterly unreal reformist design, wedded to the vacuous methodology of “little by little.” For even the smallest partial relations of the alternative system are *deeply embedded in the general value determinations* of an overall framework of human needs whose inviolable elementary axiom is the radical exclusion of *waste and destruction*, in accord with its *innermost nature*.

At the same time, on the other side, no partial “correctives” can be transferred from the operational framework of capital into a genuinely socialist order, as the disastrous failure of Gorbachev’s “market socialist” venture painfully and conclusively demonstrated. For also in that respect we would always be confronted by the radical incompatibility

of value determinations, even if in that case the value involved is destructive *counter value*, corresponding to the ultimate “necessarily ignored” limits of the capital system itself. The systemic limits of capital are thoroughly compatible with waste and destruction. For such normative considerations can only be *secondary* to capital. More fundamental determinations must take the precedence over such concerns. This is why capital’s original *indifference to waste and destruction* (never a more positive posture than indifference) is turned into their most active promotion when conditions require that shift. In fact waste and destruction must be relentlessly pursued in this system in direct subordination to the *imperative of capital expansion*, the overwhelming systemic determinant. The more so the further we leave behind the historically ascending phase of the capital system’s development. And no one should be fooled by the fact that frequently the preponderant assertion of *counter value* is misrepresented and rationalized as “*value neutrality*” by capital’s celebrated ideologists.

It was therefore mind-boggling that at the time of Gorbachev’s ill-fated “perestroika” his “ideology chief” (called officially by that name) could seriously assert that the capitalist market and its commodity relations were the instrumental embodiments of “universal human values” and a “major achievement of human civilization,” adding to these grotesque capitulatory assertions that the capitalist market was even “*the guarantee of the renewal of socialism*.” [9] Such theorists kept talking about the adoption of the “market mechanism,” when the capitalist market was *anything but* an adaptable neutral “*mechanism*.” It was in fact *incurably value laden*, and must always remain so. In this kind of conception “curiously shared by Gorbachev’s “socialist ideology chief” (and others) with the Friedrich von Hayeks of this world who violently denounced any idea of socialism as “The Road to Serfdom” [10] “*exchange* in general was ahistorically and anti-historically equated with *capitalist exchange*, and the ever more destructive reality of the *capitalist market* with a fictionalized benevolent “*market*” in general. Whether they realized it or not, they capitulated thereby to idealizing the imperatives of a ruthless system of necessary *market domination* (ultimately inseparable from the ravages of imperialism) required by the inner determinations of capital’s social metabolic order. The adoption of this capitulatory position was equally pronounced but even more damaging in Gorbachev’s reform document. For he insisted that

There are *no alternatives to the market*. Only the market can ensure the satisfaction of *people’s needs*, the *fair distribution* of wealth, *social rights*, and the strengthening of *freedom and democracy*. The market would permit the Soviet economy to be *organically* linked with the world’s, and give our citizens access to all the achievements of *world civilization*. [11]

Naturally, given the total unreality of Gorbachev’s “no alternative” wishful thinking, expecting the generous supply “to the people” of all those wonderful would-be achievements and benefits, in all domains, from the global capitalist market, this venture could only end, most humiliatingly, in the disastrous implosion of the Soviet-type system.

5. It is not at all accidental or surprising that the proposition of “*there is no alternative*” occupies such a prominent place in the socioeconomic and political conceptions formulated from capital’s standpoint. Not even the greatest thinkers of the bourgeoisie “like Adam Smith and Hegel” could be exceptions in this respect. For it is absolutely true that the bourgeois order either succeeds in asserting itself in the form of dynamic *capital expansion*, or it is condemned to ultimate failure. There can be really *no conceivable alternative* to endless capital expansion from capital’s standpoint, determining thereby the vision of all those who adopt it. But the adoption of this standpoint also means that the question of “*what price must be paid*” for uncontrollable capital expansion beyond a certain point in time “once the ascendant phase of the system’s development is left behind” cannot enter into consideration at all. The violation of *historical time* is therefore the necessary consequence of adopting capital’s standpoint by internalizing the system’s expansionary imperative as its most fundamental and absolutely unalterable determinant. Even in the conceptions of the greatest bourgeois thinkers this position must prevail. There can be no alternative future social order whose defining characteristics would be significantly different from the already established one. This is why even Hegel, who formulated by far the most profound historical conception up to his own time, must also arbitrarily bring history to an end in capital’s unalterable present, idealizing the capitalist nation state [12] as the insuperable climax of all conceivable historical development, despite his sharp perception of the destructive

implications of the whole system of nation states.

Thus, there can be no alternative to decreeing the pernicious dogma of *no alternative* in bourgeois thought. But it is totally absurd for socialists to adopt the position of endless (and by its nature uncontrollable) capital expansion. For the corollary idealization of “again characteristically unqualified” “consumption” ignores the elementary truth that from capital’s uncritical self-expansionary vantage point there can be *no difference between destruction and consumption*. One is as good as the other for the required purpose. This is so because the commercial transaction in the capital relation—even of the most destructive kind, embodied in the ware of the military/industrial complex and the use to which it is put in its inhuman wars—successfully completes the cycle of capital’s enlarged self-reproduction, so as to be able to open a new cycle. This is the only thing that really matters to capital, no matter how unsustainable might be the consequences. Consequently, when socialists internalize the imperative of capital expansion as the necessary ground of the advocated growth, they do not simply accept an isolated tenet but a whole “package deal.” Knowingly or not, they accept at the same time all of the *false alternatives*—like “growth or no-growth”—that can be derived from the uncritical advocacy of necessary capital expansion.

The false alternative of *no growth* must be rejected by us not only because its adoption would perpetuate the most gruesome misery and inequality now dominating the world, with struggle and destructiveness inseparable from it. The radical negation of that approach can only be a necessary point of departure. The inherently *positive* dimension of our vision involves the fundamental redefinition of *wealth itself* as known to us. Under capital’s social metabolic order we are confronted by *the alienating rule of wealth over society*, directly affecting every aspect of life, from the narrowly economic to the cultural and spiritual domains. Consequently, we cannot get out of capital’s vicious circle, with all of its ultimately destructive determinations and false alternatives, without fully turning around that vital relationship. Namely, without *making society* “the society of freely associated individuals” *rule over wealth* redefining at the same time also their relation to time and to the kind of *use* to which the products of human labor are put. As Marx had written already in one of his early works:

In a future society, in which class antagonism will have ceased, in which there will no longer be any classes, use will no longer be determined by the *minimum time of production*; but the time of production devoted to an article will be determined by the *degree of its social utility*. [13]

This means an uncompromising departure from viewing wealth as a fetishistic material entity which must ignore the *real individuals* who are the creators of wealth. Naturally, capital—in its false claim to be identical to wealth, as the “creator and embodiment of wealth”—must ignore the individuals, in the self-legitimizing service of its own social metabolic control. In this way, by usurping the role of real wealth and subverting the potential use to which it could be put, capital is the *enemy of historical time*. This is what must be redressed for the sake of human survival itself. Thus all constituents of the unfolding relationships among the historically self-determining real individuals, together with the wealth they create and positively allocate through the conscious application of the only viable modality of time—*disposable time*—must be brought together in a qualitatively different social metabolic framework. To say it with Marx:

real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labor time, but rather *disposable time*. Labour time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and disposable time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time; or, the positing of an individual’s entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, *subsumption under labour*. [14]

Disposable time is the *individuals’ actual historical time*. In contrast, necessary labor time required for the functioning of capital’s mode of social metabolic control is *anti-historical*, denying the individuals the only way in which they can assert and fulfill themselves as *real historical subjects* in control of their own life-activity. In the form of capital’s necessary labor time the individuals are subjected to time exercised as *tyrannical judge and degrading measure*, with

no court of appeal, instead of being itself judged and measured in relation to qualitative human criteria “by the *needs* of the social individuals.” [15] Capital’s perversely self-absolutizing anti-historical time thus superimposes itself over human life as fetishistic *determinant* which reduces living labor to “*time’s carcass*,” as discussed elsewhere, in relation to “The Necessity of Planning.” The historical challenge is, then, to move in the alternative social metabolic order from the rule of capital’s frozen time as *alienating determinant* to become freely *determined* by the social individuals themselves who consciously dedicate to the realization of their chosen objectives their incomparably richer resources of *disposable time* than what could be squeezed out of them through the tyranny of necessary labor time. This is an absolutely vital difference. For only social individuals can really determine their own *disposable time*, in sharp contrast to necessary labor time which dominates them. The adoption of disposable time is the only conceivable and rightful way in which time can be transformed from *tyrannical determinant* into autonomously and creatively *determined* constituent of the reproduction process.

6. This challenge necessarily involves the supersession of the structurally enforced hierarchical social division of labor. For so long as time dominates society in the form of the imperative to extract the surplus labor time of its overwhelming majority, the personnel in charge of this process must lead a substantially different form of existence, in conformity to its function as the *willing enforcer of the alienating time imperative*. At the same time the overwhelming majority of the individuals are “*degraded to mere worker, subsumed under labour*.” Under such conditions, the social reproduction process must sink ever deeper into its *structural crisis*, with the perilous ultimate implications of no possible way of return.

The nightmare of the “stationary state” remains a nightmare even if one tries to alleviate it, as John Stuart Mill proposed, through the illusory remedy of “better distribution” taken in isolation. There can be no such thing as “better distribution” without a radical restructuring of the *production process* itself. The socialist hegemonic alternative to the rule of capital requires fundamentally overcoming the *truncated dialectic* in the vital interrelationship of *production, distribution, and consumption*. For without that, the socialist aim of turning work into “life’s prime want” is inconceivable. To quote Marx:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but *life’s prime want*; after the productive forces have also increased with the *all-round development of the individual*, and all the springs of *co-operative wealth* flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!* [16]

These are the *overall targets* of socialist transformation, providing the *compass* of the journey and simultaneously also the *measure* of the achievements accomplished (or failed to be accomplished) on the way. Within such a vision of the hegemonic alternative to capital’s social reproductive order there can be no room at all for anything like “the stationary state,” nor for any of the false alternatives associated with or derived from it.” The *all-round development* of the individuals,” consciously exercising the full resources of their *disposable time*, within the framework of the new social metabolic control oriented toward the production of “*co-operative wealth*,” is meant to provide the basis of a *qualitatively* different accountancy: the necessary *socialist accountancy*, defined by human need and diametrically opposed to fetishistic quantification and to the concomitant unavoidable waste.

This is why the vital importance of *growth of a sustainable kind* can be recognized and successfully managed in the alternative social metabolic framework. Such an alternative order of social metabolic control would be one where the antithesis between mental and physical labor—always vital for maintaining the absolute domination over labor by capital as the usurper of the role of the controlling historical subject—must vanish for good. Consequently, consciously pursued productivity itself can be elevated to a *qualitatively higher level*, without any danger of uncontrollable waste, bringing forth genuine—and not narrowly profit-oriented material—wealth of which the “rich social individuals” (Marx), as autonomous historical subjects (and rich precisely in that sense) are fully in control.

In the “stationary state,” by contrast, the individuals could not be genuine historical subjects. For they could not be in control of a life of their own, in view of being at the mercy of the worst kind of material determinations directly under the rule of *incurable scarcity*.

Ever growing—and by its ultimate implications catastrophic—waste in the capital system is inseparable from the most irresponsible way in which the produced goods and services are *utilized*, in the service of profitable capital-expansion. Perversely, the lower their rate of utilization the higher the scope for profitable replacement—an absurdity emanating from capital’s alienated vantage point whereby there can be no meaningful distinction drawn between *consumption and destruction*. For totally wasteful *destruction* just as adequately fulfills the demand required by self-expansory capital for a new profitable cycle of production as genuine consumption corresponding to use would be able to do. However, the moment of truth arrives when a heavy price must be paid for capital’s criminally irresponsible husbandry, in the course of historical development. That is the point where the imperative to adopt an increasingly better and incomparably more responsible *rate of utilization* of the produced goods and services—and indeed consciously produced with that aim in mind, in relation to qualitative human need and use—becomes absolutely vital. For *the only viable economy*—one that economizes in a meaningful way and is thereby sustainable in the near and more distant future—can only be the kind of rationally managed economy, oriented toward the *optimal utilization* of the produced goods and services. There can be no *growth of a sustainable kind* outside these parameters of rational husbandry oriented by genuine human need.

To take a crucially important example of what is incurably wrong in this respect under the rule of capital, we should think of the way in which the ever growing numbers of motor cars are utilized in our societies. The resources squandered on the production and fueling of motor cars are immense under “advanced capitalism,” representing the second highest expenditure—after the mortgage commitments—in the particular households. Absurdly, however, the rate of utilization of motor cars is less than *1 percent*, spuriously justified by the *exclusive possession rights* conferred upon their purchasers. At the same time the thoroughly practicable real alternative is not simply neglected but actively sabotaged by the massive vested interests of quasi-monopolistic corporations. For the simple truth is that what the individuals *need* (and do not obtain, despite the heavy financial burden imposed upon them) are adequate *transport services*, and not the economically wasteful and environmentally most damaging privately owned commodity which also makes them lose countless hours of their lives in unhealthy *traffic jams*.

Evidently, the *real alternative* would be to develop *public transport* to the qualitatively highest level, satisfying the necessary economic, environmental, and personal health criteria well within the scope of such a rationally pursued project, confining at the same time the use of—collectively owned and appropriately allocated, but not exclusively/wastefully possessed—motor cars to specific functions. Thus the individuals’ need itself—in this case their genuine need for *proper transport services*—would determine the targets of the vehicles and communication facilities (like roads, railway networks, and navigation systems) to be produced and maintained, in accord with the principle of optimal utilization, instead of the individuals being completely dominated by the established system’s fetishistic need for profitable but ultimately destructive capital expansion.

The unavoidable, but up to the present time tendentiously avoided, question of the *real economy*, corresponding to the considerations presented in this article, must be faced in the very near future. For in the so-called third world countries it is inconceivable to follow the wasteful “development” pattern of the past, which in fact condemned them to their precarious condition of today, under the rule of capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction. The clamorous failure of the much promoted “modernization theories” and their corresponding institutional embodiments clearly demonstrated the hopelessness of that approach.

7. In one respect, at least, we have seen alarm raised in this regard—characteristically pressing at the same time for the assertion and absolute preservation of the privileges of the dominant capitalist countries—in the recent past. It concerned the internationally growing need for *energy resources* and the competitive intervention of some potentially immense economic powers, above all China, in the unfolding process. Today that concern is primarily about China,

but in due course also India must be added, of course, to the list of major countries unavoidably pressing for vital energy resources. And when we add to China the population of the Indian subcontinent, we are talking about more than *two and a half billion people*. Naturally, if they really followed the once grotesquely propagandized prescription of *The Stages of Economic Growth*, [17] with its simple-minded advocacy of “capitalist take-off and drive to maturity,” that would have devastating consequences for all of us. For the fully automobilized society of two and a half billion people on the U.S. model of “advanced capitalist development,” with more than 700 motor cars to every 1,000 people, would mean that we would be all dead before long through the global “modernizing” benefits of poisonous pollution, not to mention the total depletion of the planet’s oil reserves in no time at all. But by the same token, in an opposite sense, no one can seriously envisage that the countries in question could be left indefinitely where they stand today. To imagine that the two and a half billion people of China and the Indian subcontinent could be permanently condemned to their existing predicament, still in heavy dependency to the capitalistically advanced parts of the world in one way or another, defies all credulity. The only question is: whether humanity can find a rationally viable and truly equitable solution to the legitimate demand for social and economic development of the peoples involved. Otherwise, antagonistic competition and destructive struggle over resources are the way of the future, as befits the orienting framework and operating principles of capital’s mode of social reproductive control.

Another respect in which the absolute imperative to adopt a qualitatively different way of organizing economic and social life appeared on the horizon in our time concerns the *ecology*. But again, the only viable way of addressing the increasingly grave problems of our global ecology—“if we want to face up in a responsible way to the aggravating problems and contradictions of the planetary household, from their direct impact on such vital questions as global warming to the elementary demand for clean water resources and safely respirable air”—is to switch from the existing order’s wasteful husbandry of fetishistic quantification to a genuinely *quality oriented* one. Ecology, in this respect, is an important but subordinate aspect of the necessary *qualitative redefinition* of utilizing the produced goods and services without which the advocacy of humanity’s permanently sustainable ecology—again: an absolute must—can be nothing more than pious hope.

The final point to stress in this context is that the urgency to face up to these problems cannot be underrated, let alone minimized, given capital’s vested interests, sustained by its dominant imperialist state formations in their insuperable rivalry among themselves. Ironically, although there is so much propagandistic talk about “globalization,” the objective requirements of making a rationally sustainable and globally coordinated reproductive order of social interchanges work are constantly violated. Yet, given the present stage of historical development, the irrepressible truth remains that with regard to all of the major issues discussed in this article we are really concerned with ever aggravating *global challenges*, requiring *global solutions*. However, our gravest concern is that capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction—in view of its inherently antagonistic structural determinations and their destructive manifestations—is not amenable at all to viable global solutions. Capital, given its unalterable nature, is nothing unless it can prevail in the form of *structural domination*. But the inseparable other dimension of structural domination is *structural subordination*. This is the way in which capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction always functioned and always must try to function, bringing with it even the most devastating wars of which we have much more than just a foretaste in our time. The violent assertion of the destructive imperatives of global hegemonic imperialism, through the formerly unimaginable destructive might of the United States as the global hegemon, cannot bring *global solutions* to our aggravating problems but only *global disaster*. Thus, the unavoidable necessity to address these global problems in a historically sustainable way puts the challenge of socialism in the twenty-first century—the only viable hegemonic alternative to capital’s mode of social metabolic control—on the order of the day.

[1] Articles about Istvan Meszaros are at [On the contribution of the outstanding Hungarian Marxist philosopher István Mészáros \(1930-2017\) to critical thinking](#) and [After Alienation](#).

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Penguin Classics, 1992), 85.

[3] John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Prometheus Books, 2004), 751.

[4] Mill, *Principles*, 749.

[5] Mill, *Principles*, 749.

[6] To quote this book with its full, utterly pretentious, title, Donella H. Meadows, et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (London: Earth Island Limited, 1972).

[7] Tellingly, the principal theoretical figure behind this “growth limiting” venture, Professor Jay Forrester, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, contemptuously dismissed all concern with equality as a mere “shibboleth of equality.” See his interview in *Le Monde*, August 1, 1972.

[8] See István Mészáros, *Socialism or Barbarism: From the “American Century” to the Crossroads* (Monthly Review Press, 2001).

[9] Vadim Medvedev, “The Ideology of Perestroika,” in *Perestroika Annual 2*, Abel Aganbegyan, (ed.) (London: Futura/Macdonald, 1989), 31–32.

[10] The title of Hayek’s most famous crusading book.

[11] Gorbachev quoted in John Rettie, “Only Market Can Save Soviet Economy,” *The Guardian*, October 17, 1990.

[12] To quote one of Hegel’s idealizing postulates: “The nation state is mind in its substantive rationality and immediate actuality and is therefore the absolute power on earth.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212.

[13] Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6, 134. Quoted in István Mészáros, “The Communitarian System and the Law of Value in Marx and Lukács” (chapter 19 of *Beyond Capital*), *Critique*, no. 23, 1991, 36. See also chapter 15 (“The Decreasing Rate of Utilization under Capitalism”) and chapter 16 (“The Decreasing Rate of Utilization and the Capitalist State”) of *Beyond Capital*, which deal with some important related issues.

[14] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 708.

[15] *Ibid*

[16] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in *Marx and Engels, Selected Works*, vol. 2, 23.

[17] See Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).