Sociopolitical and philosophical questions of organization in making a human society

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Abstract

Marx’s Marxism looked forward to a democratic workers’ state that would wither away into a free association of working humanity. Experience since then has shown that reformist social democracy leaves capitalism and state bureaucracies intact and that revolutionary movements have created or been transformed into non-democratic state bureaucracies that have left workers still subordinate to (and arguably exploited by) employing agencies. This paper asks how a revolutionary workers’ movement can end capitalist production and disperse an alienated state without generating a new autocracy or alienated state. Institutional forms like revolutionary parties and even workers’ councils have a tendency to become alienated structures by the very fact of having to coordinate production, distribution and the transformation of social relations. This tendency, however, is not absolute, and can be countered by the arguments and, particularly, the struggles of organized and activist workers and communities. For this to succeed, however, political awareness of these tendencies towards bureaucratization and alienation, and a prior sociopolitical and philosophical discussion and awareness of relevant issues, should become widespread. This paper ends with 14 theses about core elements of this politics—which are offered for discussion with no expectation or desire that these issues should be decided except in the course of revolutionary and post-revolutionary struggle.

Part 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to answer a difficult problem in political sociology and philosophy that is also a crippling problem in the practical politics of the left. This is how we⁠¹ can create a new form of society in which ordinary working people run their lives and, collectively, in an open and reasonably democratic way, also make the basic decisions about the shape of their world, regional, local and daily social, economic, and environmental contexts. Put in different terms:

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⁠¹ By “we” here I mean the world’s working classes—i.e., the great majority of people on this planet. However, as of 2009 when I write this, the great majority of workers in the world are not actively revolutionary—though some millions (perhaps) are. Thus, the “we” who read this, and the “we” available to take near-term action that this paper discusses, are a “we” that is far from representative of most workers. It is my hope that the ideas in this paper can help resolve this discrepancy in ways that help set the stage for the next mass working class radicalization to re-shape and, indeed, save, the world.
How can we eliminate the capitalist, state-ridden way of running things that is destroying the environment, creates frequent wars, deprives most human beings of any meaningful say about urban or rural development, the nature and quality of their schooling, or how and on what they spend their working day, and creates a politics in which the promises of the campaigns have little to do with either the problems that humanity needs to resolve or the actions the politicians take when once in office? And to put down the third part of this dilemma: How can we make rapid and thoroughgoing change without creating a bureaucratic dictatorship that will make things even worse?

Phrasing this historically, workers and peasants with similar aspirations in Russia in 1917 and China in the 1940s created revolutions—but found that the results a decade later were bureaucratic dictatorships. Similar fates befell revolutions in Vietnam and other places, although in each case the details about what happened and why were somewhat different. In other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and France, social democratic parties that claim to represent workers, the poor and some farmers come repeatedly into office, but create only a more welfare-state oriented version of capitalism that solves none of the problems posed in the first paragraph.

On the left, there have been many attempts to answer this problem. Anarchists have claimed that the problem is the state, and that parties simply re-create the state and all the problems when they come to power either through election or revolution. Trotskyists argue that the problem has been the form and politics of the parties that have taken power, but continue to maintain that the party to lead the revolution is essential. Marxist humanists try to work out non-party forms of organization that can engage pre-revolutionary and revolutionary masses in dialogue so that ordinary workers remain in control of revolutionary processes.

All of us have failed so far, and indeed, various political tendencies have generated powerful political arguments to explain (or explain away) our failures and to offer hope for the future. Past failures do not mean that we will continue to fail in the future. History creates opportunities for system transformation out of its own dialectical development—often involving changes whose implications we fail to see before they are upon us. Our actions now can lay the basis for making important changes during such opportunities (often taking the form of socioeconomic, military or other crises). But to do this, we need to improve and disseminate (one or more) credible outlines of a solution to the problems posed above: How can the working billions in the world take over the madhouse that currently exists and turn it into something good?

In my opinion, there are at least three major questions that many people who deeply want such change have to find credible answers to for the movement to be able to move forward. These are

1. How could ordinary people actually overthrow the monstrous, powerful institutions of the state, the corporations, and the market (for goods, services and labor) that dominate life?
2. How could we do so without having our efforts create equally bad or worse systems of domination? Would we jump out of the pot of corporate capitalism into the fire of Stalinist dictatorship and gulags? And

3. How could we re-shape the world after we took power away from the current institutions so that our new ways of doing things would make sure people had access to the food and other goods they need, have useful and pleasant ways to do the work that needs to be done, have time for friendships and relationships, move rapidly to reduce and then eliminate structured inequalities among nations, races, men and women, and people of different occupations, and solve problems like environmental catastrophe and war?

I have already written a paper (Friedman 2008), that presents some ideas about the third question. It needs to be re-written in more popular form, but my ideas on this topic can be found there, and seem to me to be reasonably consistent with what I say in this paper.

Since my intention in this paper is to focus primarily on the second question, I will only sketch out one scenario about how we could “take power.” I do that here in order to set the stage for my concerns on question 2—both in terms of presenting a context in which these concerns seem important and also in terms of presenting a process of current events during which “we” can act in some of the ways I discuss below so that the process of taking power is more likely to lead to a good political process rather than to dictatorship. That is, all three of these questions are interlinked, with each set of “answers” at time 1 conditioning what is possible at time 2 and so forth—but also in reverse, with our ideas and intentions for later stages of the process conditioning what we do at earlier stages.

How could we “take power”? One scenario—based on a lot of the history of the last two hundred years, including “classic” experiences like the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the revolution in Catalonia in 1936, that in Hungary in 1956, and the French May Days of 1968, as well as more recent experiences like those in Argentina in 2001-2002—is as follows:

During a period of social, economic or other uncertainty when many people are unhappy about the way things are going, some group of workers, the unemployed, or other members of the broadly-defined working class engage in a demonstration, or a sit-down strike like those of the 1930s or that by the Republic Window makers in Chicago in 2009, or block a major highway. Perhaps simply because it catches the imagination, or perhaps because the authorities try to repress it, this action gains widespread support, and others emulate it—and this becomes a flood of action that overwhelms efforts by the authorities to suppress it. Often, indeed, their efforts at repression lead to situations where the soldiers simply refuse to take part in the repression, or even switch sides and join the insurrection.

In order to coordinate their struggle, workers form committees at their workplaces (which may then seize control over their workplaces), neighbors or unemployed people form committees, and the committees in a local area send
delegates to frequent, perhaps even continuous, meetings to make decisions about what needs to be done. As the prior political and economic institutions lose authority, these new committees (which are often called workers' councils) take over responsibility. Often, a moment of confrontation becomes inevitable, and in a successful social transformation these workers' councils dissolve the power of the pre-existing governing bodies—including having the people who do the work taking over economic decision making. (Government bureaucratic agencies either get dissolved or get taken over by their workers under the supervision of the councils—there are a lot of difficult issues on this that need to be worked out with little experience to guide us as yet.)

For this process to work out, we need to have clear sets of ideas (which may take the form of warring visions held by different political factions or parties) that paint a picture of how we will use our power after we have it and how we will structure our power so that it remains ours rather than becoming a dictatorship. In practice, none of these ideas will work out precisely as planned, since revolutions are schools that teach everyone new lessons, but they probably do not need to be precise blueprints for what we will do. Indeed, in many ways, the disagreements and uncertainties about what is desirable and what is needed, and the contending political forces that develop around these, may well be part of the process by which we, first, render the old powers uncertain and unable to counter the movement, and, then, after we disperse their power, part of the process by which we keep power accountable, open, and in our hands.

Part 2. The question of how to create a radical transformation of human society without setting the stage for a dictatorship

Let us turn now to the “meat” of this argument.

The opposition to a “leadership-building” party sees correctly that such a party becomes its opposite after taking power—but fails to see the need for a revolutionary party or parties that work to coalesce the movement to do away with the State and to install workers’ councils as supreme. In this sense, they fail to see revolutionary social change as a process that involves the need for different organizational forms at different times. In this sense, formulations that are simply “anti-party” attempt to find fixed forms that hold good throughout the raging storms of history. This contradicts the perspective that dialectics is change and negation.

However, the “becoming its opposite” aspects of a party is important. It is due to a social reality that also will apply, to some extent, to workers’ councils: to the extent that they become responsible for coordinating production, distribution, labor, defense against counter-revolution, and the re-making of society, they become negated as power-from-below (to some extent, anyway—at the least, this is a strong tendency, and takes concrete form in spending much of their time directing and coordinating others’ labor.)
The negation of this negation is workers and communities coordinating from below—and in Making the World Anew (as well as very briefly below in this paper) I discuss the historical struggles and processes through which this might arise. It will not, however, take place instantly since it depends on political choices about the political priorities to be given to global action to deal with environmental crises, international inequality, and the ways in which we will reorganize global divisions of labor and decision-making. These set the stage for the social creation of friendships of workers around the globe and thus the creation of a global workers’ unity for itself in every sense (and the transcending of class by withering it away).

The “day after taking power” (which will last for some years) will be a moment of urgent tasks, conflicting interests among sections of workers, and also with other people, much solidarity based on the prior struggle, and many competing and conflicting political/economic perspectives about how to make the world anew. Efforts to use power-from-above to decide these issues, rather than helping discussion-from-below (where “discussion” includes demonstrations, negotiations with unions and other organizations, strikes, etc.) will lead to tendencies towards bureaucratization and perhaps even dictatorship—and yet, as noted next, authoritative coordination will be needed. (This establishes a limited contradiction with potential fruitful outcomes.)

As I envision this period, it will be a period in which people set up and/or join many organizations to solve urgent problems (or just have fun) and in which some at least of their time devoted to these organizations counts as work time. Some of these organizations may well seek, and obtain, membership in local workers’ councils. One way to think about these organizations is that they become a set of mediators between individuals, friendship groups, work groups and families, on the one hand, and workers’ councils on another. These mediators will include unions at work; ecology clubs; neighbors who want to get a school built or a waste dump cleaned up; local (and wider) groups against gender, racial, ethnic or other subordination; and political parties or interest groups with wider perspectives on the changes they want (or want to prevent).

As mentioned, there will be urgent tasks that need to be done to maintain economic viability, change the society, deal with global warming, and much else. Such tasks will require a degree of central coordination and this will probably best be lodged in a workers’ council for the world and other councils with regional or national remits. To prevent bureaucratization, and perhaps the crystallization of new exploitative production relations and a new class (or the maintenance of the old exploitation under new rulers and in a new form), will require challenge to authority from below by some of these mediating forces, and, in time the usurpation of authority to coordinate people’s “work time” and other resources.

This may be simultaneously the withering away of the state and the transformation into the society of freely associated labor; or there might be stages of combined and uneven withering. I do not know at this point how this will coordinate over time with the formation of a global working class for itself—
but my guess is that the process of forming the class-for-itself will lead this as an interactive (dialectical?) process with the withering of the state being part of the abolition of the working class by its becoming all of humanity in a cooperative society. The disagreements over priorities and other issues will be the basis for organization and activism at the base that will help prevent bureaucratization etc. - at least if the post-take-over crisis does not become too severe (?)).

Part 3. Theses

The following “theses” outline some actions, formations and ideas that are needed now if we are to change the world towards a socialism-from-below.

1. A philosophically aware (set of) revolutionary parties who understand that they and the higher-level workers councils will become “the problem” when they become the authoritative coordinators - but also that this is nonetheless a time-limited need for the process to move forward.

2. Political democracy and struggle within and between parties both before and after the revolution. I anticipate that these will start from and deepen most existing definitions of human rights other than those that enshrine the right of capitalist and state property over those of workers and the people.

3. Our movement should put a positive political value on, and widely discuss the need for, challenges to parties and workers' councils from below. (Some such movements may tend to re-create or increase inequality. These movements, if put forward by large sections of the population, are part of what working class democracy means. This is discussed more fully in Friedman 2008).

4. Willingness to split one’s party if it becomes too powerful or in any way begins to crystallize as a power above the people.

5. Similarly, our politics should value and support challenges from below (and above to the extent that the “top” is aware) of any and all fetishization of authority or its symbols.

6. It seems likely that the longer and harder a struggle counter-revolutionaries wage to destroy the new system, the more difficult it will be to avoid setting up dangerous state-like structures of repression. Farber’s (1990) discussion of the Russian revolution offers valuable lessons about steps that might help resist such pressures. It does not, however, fully take account of the ways in which the experience of civil war tends to “teach” repressive patterns of thought and action. Further discussion and debate around these issues both before and during periods of social transformation is needed and should be seen as part of what I am proposing here.
7. The pressure to prevent hierarchy etc. derives from, and should be valued as deriving from, the active and agentic work and thinking that workers and others do to re-make the world and the political struggles they engage in to make this happen (often against the wishes of workers councils and parties) via coordinating their own efforts and challenging obstacles that they encounter in their efforts to make needed changes at work or in their community.

8. In past revolutions and social movements, arguments based on efficiency and the need to maintain production, perhaps together with the fear of punishment for unauthorized work stoppages, often convince workers to use grievance procedures and similar non-disruptive ways of resolving disputes with those in authority at workplaces. Kevin Murphy (2007) in his history of a steel factory in Moscow during the early 1900s provides considerable evidence that the argument about efficiency and the need to maintain production was important in demobilizing and depoliticizing workers in post-revolutionary Russia. Friedman (1982) discusses how similar dynamics demobilized and disempowered activist and mobilized truck drivers in Los Angeles during the 1960s. Thus, a politics that values defiant and disruptive rank and file activism at work may be crucial for a successful post-revolutionary social transformation. I would go so far as to suggest that a norm that every workgroup or workplace should engage in at least one or two unauthorized strikes a year should perhaps be a part of post-revolutionary culture - and that political parties and other groups should see this as part of their core positions, and that a revolutionary politics should include a commitment to uphold this norm and, perhaps, to split any party-in-office that opposes this in practice. (This would also serve as one partial answer to the question posed next about how to keep people active and engaged.)

9. One problem that we may face will be how to keep huge numbers of people involved in the discussions needed to make decision-making be truly democratic and participatory. I have put several some ideas on this in “Making the World Anew,” so here I will only briefly deal with it. First, this is an issue that needs wide discussion among movements during the period before the movements take power, so that different ideas can be widely tried out as soon as becomes possible. Secondly, part of the solution probably lies in a re-definition of what “work” is and how “work time” should be used (and thus what uses of time should receive remuneration). Work time needs to include considerable time for small-group, departmental, and workplace discussions to take place about what should be produced or done, how this should happen, and the socio-political issues that will influence these issues. “Work” should include not merely production, distribution and exchange of what is currently considered workplace products or services, but also the
chores and social interactions people do at home and in their neighborhoods. “Work” also probably should include “self time” in which people think, contemplate and generally maintain their sense of who they are and what they want to do. Discussions and participation should be viewed as an integral part of all of these except (perhaps) “self time,” and time should be allocated accordingly. Third, working this out should be easier to the extent that meetings have the power to take effective action. Finally, we should recognize that we do not know how to run meetings so that such discussions can be both productive and fun. Working this out should be easier to the extent that the meetings actually have the power to take effective action—but the question of how to structure and engage in meetings needs wide discussion, theorization, and perhaps research.

10. Clear philosophically and politically based awareness of the need to formulate proposals for action clearly; and to experiment in directing the allocation/self-allocation of people’s time and other resources to different tasks in terms of use values as democratically decided. This then can and should be seen as evolving to being “coordinated from below” in response to democratic processes.

11. “Workplace and community militias should devolve to, and remain under, local control” is a high value to be understood before the revolution and to be struggled for from Day 1. Of course, to the extent that the revolution is under attack from other geographic areas, this process will be more difficult. But once the working class pretty much becomes in control everywhere, this will accelerate—and at all times, working class efforts to do this should be viewed as well within the spirit of the revolution. (NB: this challenges gun control.)

12. Education focusing on “building from below” and on how to build local opposition movements. This may build on the thoughts and experiences of past thinkers like Freire and of past movements.

13. One useful pre-revolutionary organizational form is a network of groups and/or magazines to discuss “afterwards” and its dialectical relationships to the situation now and its implications for parties and for workers councils “now” and “then”. Such philosophizing is best to the extent that it involves a large number of workplace and community struggle leaders. Such groups should try to educate the various parties and organizations and militants about the contradictory histories of all forms and organizations as the struggle progresses. That is, they should see their task as to help people be aware that the leaders and even the councils are potential enemies as well as necessary forms for authoritative coordination.
14. Formulations that emphasize the pre-revolutionary need for “the party” are prone to sectarian and/or thuggish behavior. No one party, though, can create a socialist revolution of the kind that will improve things. Maybe we should think of creating a socialist struggle milieu, including several revolutionary parties with different ideas about what changes are needed, how to get there, and how to do it—that is, on the “three questions” posed at the beginning of this paper as well as others. This struggle milieu should produce lots of good thought and, hopefully, comradeship among members of different parties. (This has happened in the past.) During the revolutionary process itself, there is likely to be a need for one or more of these parties to push politically for workers councils to form, to take more and more responsibility, for workers to run workplaces, and, then to disperse the capitalist state and have the councils run things. This, however, is the high point of parties’ role, I think. After Councils take power, parties can become ossified and alienated structures that lead towards dictatorship.

References


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