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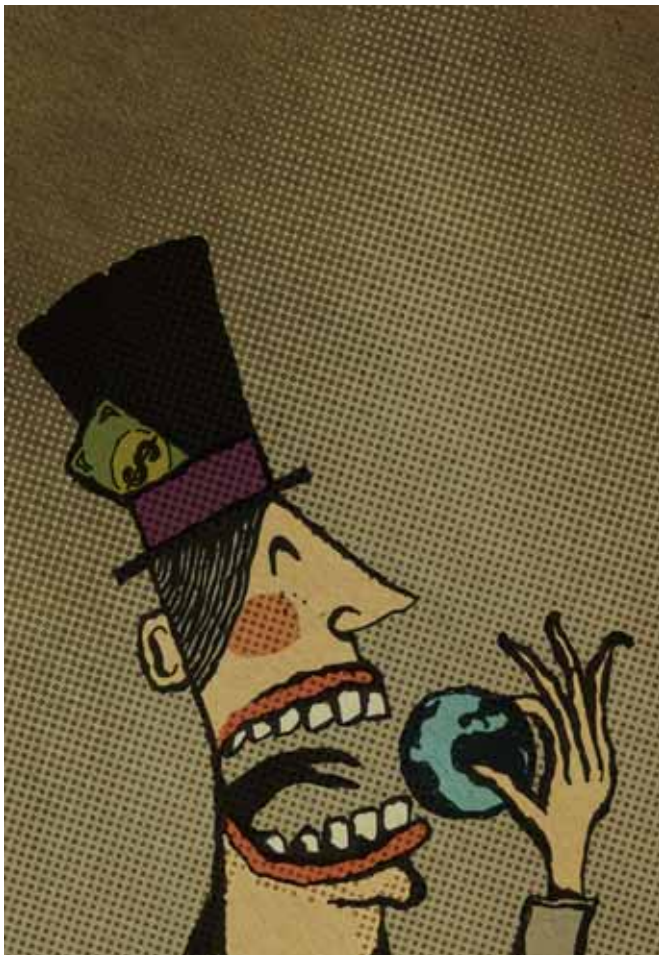
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> The End of the World or the End of Capitalism?

by **Leslie Sklair**, London School of Economics, United Kingdom



| Illustration by Arbu.

very long-term process of negating, avoiding, and eventually consigning to the dustbin of history global capitalism, social democracy, and the state forms they have created.

Why is capitalist globalization bound to fail to bring prosperity, happiness and peace to all humanity? Capitalism's two fatal flaws are the crises of class polarization (the rich get richer, the very poor are always with us, and the middle class is increasingly insecure) and of ecological unsustainability (an inevitable consequence of both capitalist and socialist dogmas of growth promoted relentlessly by the culture-ideology of consumerism). These crises can be directly attributed to the transnational capitalist class (consisting of corporate, political, professional, and consumerist fractions) and its dominant value system, the culture-ideology of consumerism.¹

Here, I simply want to point toward key elements of a progressive non-capitalist transition. The first is size. Huge transnational corporations and huge corporate states, serviced by huge professional and huge consumer goods and services organizations, dominate the lives of people everywhere, so it seems obvious that smaller scale structures might work better and enable people to live more fulfilling lives. This is not the fantasy of cellular localism; my vision of an alternative, radical, progressive globalization envisages networks of small producer-consumer cooperatives (PCC) cooperating at a variety of levels, primarily to ensure a decent standard of living for everyone on the planet.

How could PCCs be organized to release the emancipatory potential of generic globalization in a non-capitalist world? The simple and encouraging answer is that they would work, in the early stages of transformation at least, much as millions of small-scale cooperative groups work at present in enclaves all over the world. The other essays in

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world,” it has been said, “than to imagine the end of capitalism” – a profound truth about the era of capitalist globalization. Far more has been written about the evils of capitalism, than about what a non-capitalist world might look like, especially in the context of the so-called socialisms and communisms of the recent past. To go beyond this, we have to begin again. My argument is that prospects for progressive change are best seen as a

this symposium document inspiring stories of progressive activism and consciousness-raising but, unsurprisingly, they are all problematic. Sharryn Kasmir shows that Mondragon – once the greatest hope of the cooperative movement – seems inevitably compromised within the framework of a global capitalist system. In her case study of the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society in Kerala, Michelle Williams reveals the necessary conditions for genuine workers' control, but her conclusions suggest that its future is not secure. In the interview with Paul Singer the evolution of the Solidarity Economy in Brazil offers encouraging results in bringing people out of poverty, but it remains an enormous task, and it is unclear how the society as a whole could be changed. Julián Rebón's analysis of worker-run factories in Argentina provokes questions about why a capitalist state would make it easy for them to prosper or even survive, as does Theodoros Rakopoulos' research on anti-middleman markets in Greece, where leftist "seizure" of the state by Syriza appears to inhibit rather than support the movement.

None of these initiatives indicates a way out of capitalist exploitation or ecological unsustainability, and none of them really problematizes the role of the state – whether leftist, rightist or centrist – nor how these initiatives work with the capitalist consumerist market. I conclude that all states end up being hierarchical, and that only in small-scale communities like PCCs, locally or globally linked via the Internet, can we avoid this inevitable slippery slope.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci said that in periods of crisis the old is dying and the new is not yet born. While Gramsci drew attention to the morbid symptoms of such a situation (in 1930) our crisis is different, and I want to draw attention to more hopeful symptoms (waiting to be born) of our present crisis of capitalist hegemony.

The viability of initiatives trying to avoid competition with the market and escape from the hierarchic state rests on many untested assumptions. The first assumption is that those who do essential day-to-day tasks would continue to do their jobs in a PCC in preference to large corporations and their local affiliates: a multitude of people who now work in private or public sectors, directly or indirectly, establishing PCCs in their local communities producing food, organizing transport, setting up places of learning and transmission of skills, providing healthcare, running power systems, and so on. PCCs already do this all over the world on a small scale but such initiatives struggle within capitalist markets. Community-Supported Agriculture schemes in various parts of the world represent a first step on a long and difficult road to self-sufficiency in this sphere.

Neoliberal ideologues argue that there is no alternative to capitalist globalization. If we refuse to believe them and

start creating alternatives and these alternatives prove to be successful in their own terms then the logic of the market can be refuted, undermined, or simply ignored. As I write this, I can see the smiles of those who would like to believe it but find it unbelievable. One hundred years ago suggestions that human organs could be successfully transplanted, that we would be able to witness events unfolding live in any part of the world, that we could walk on the moon, that intercontinental travel could be achieved within hours and visual communication almost instantaneously, would also have been dismissed as unbelievable. As the rallying call of the World Social Forum has it: "Another world is possible."

With very few exceptions, sociology is silent on such matters; even to raise them draws the uncomfortable threat of professional ridicule from the Weberian value-free gatekeepers. It is not surprising that graduate schools and funding bodies are generally reluctant to support research along non-capitalist lines. The irony is that there is, of course, a large volume of research that is critical of many facets of capitalist society but practically none of it calls capitalism itself into question or raises issues around non-capitalist society; even a thinker as advanced and progressive as E.O. Wright more or less comes to this conclusion in his widely acclaimed *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

But the time is ripe for a new radical progressive sociology to begin to face up to this challenge of theory and research on non-capitalist society. This would involve challenging the dogma of ever-increasing growth, the mainstay of capitalist globalization, social democracy, and orthodox Marxism. This is already being discussed through the idea of convivial degrowth. It would certainly mean that the richer would become less rich and the poorer would become richer in material possessions, though all would benefit in non-material riches. The culture-ideology of consumerism would be replaced by a culture-ideology of human rights and responsibilities, prime among which would be a serious commitment to a decent, sustainable standard of living for all.

Only by ignoring the market can we escape the inevitable catastrophic consequences of capitalist globalization. Admittedly this sounds totally unrealistic, but only if we fail to acknowledge the Achilles heel of global consumerist capitalism: it is based on consumer sovereignty, and consumers cannot be forced to consume junk food and drink, junk culture, junk addictions. The power of capitalist marketing, advertising, and the ideological corporate-state apparatuses is formidable, but if parents can be brought to full awareness of how the market damages them and their children, there is still hope for the planet and all those who live on it. However difficult it is to start to imagine the end of capitalism and the hierarchic state, and the necessity of degrowth, the longer we leave it the more difficult it will be to bring it about. ■

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¹ I have written about these matters in *The transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) and *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).