

Rose-Hulman YDSA

Literature Packet

Compiled by Marcus Yoo

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Introduction

Greetings comrades, and welcome to YDSA at Rose-Hulman! I'm glad you're here. If you're reading this, it likely means you feel some tension with how the world works as it does now. Perhaps you're unsettled by it, maybe you're angry, or maybe you just sense that something is off. At the very least it means you believe that the present arrangement of society isn't inevitable, and that better futures are worth thinking seriously about.

Caring enough to ask questions is no small thing. In a world that often rewards indifference, choosing to engage at all is an act of conviction.

While I wouldn't consider myself to be a religious person, I was raised in a Christian household and attended a Christian middle school. I don't remember most of the sabbath school or bible class lessons, however this one verse stuck for some reason:

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Revelation 3:15-16

I don't read this as a call to any particular belief, but as a challenge to moral seriousness. To refuse apathy. To resist drifting along simply because it is easier than choosing a side. If you are reading this, you have chosen engagement over resignation – and I think that matters.

The goal of this packet is to introduce you to the concepts of socialism and to what YDSA stands for in *roughly* an hour and a half of reading – at least that's what Logan asked me to do. I have tried to compile readings that achieve those goals, also articles and essays that attempt to answer questions about socialism that I personally had and thought that you might have too. This is not an attempt to indoctrinate you or to hand you a finished worldview. After reading it's okay to walk away from socialism and the DSA if you realize that this is not something you personally believe in. I will take no offense. You should not accept anything here simply because it appears in print or because someone associated with YDSA wrote it. On the contrary, I encourage you to question every claim, interrogate every assumption, and reflect honestly on where you agree, where you disagree, and why. I tried to format the pages in a way to give you ample room for annotations if that's something you want to do while reading.

Many of us at Rose-Hulman are engineers or are training to be. It's in our second nature to value rigor, skepticism, and systems level thinking. Those instincts are not obstacles to socialist thought – they are essential to it. Socialism, at its best, is not about moral purity or abstract slogans. It's about asking hard questions: How do our economic systems actually function? Who benefits from them? What incentives do they create? What alternatives are possible?

As you read, consider not only whether you find these ideas appealing, but whether they are coherent, grounded, and capable of addressing the real material problems of the world we live in.

-Marcus

jacobin.com

What Is Democratic Socialism?

By Neal Meyer

14–18 minutes

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's upset victory in New York City in June added fuel to the fire that Bernie Sanders started in 2016: a resurgence of interest in democratic socialism. And there is no strand of left politics that provokes more confusion than democratic socialism.

All of a sudden, it seems everybody wants to know what democratic socialism is. Here's what you need to know.

For a Better World

Some commentators have tried to invent differences between the kind of society “democratic socialists” fight for and the kind envisioned by so-called “traditional socialists.” On MSNBC, Stephanie Ruhle [confidently declared](#) that democratic socialists make “no call for communal ownership of production.”

According to Ruhle, the excitement around the emerging socialist movement is much ado about nothing: democratic socialists want good things like free college and public libraries — and that’s pretty much it.

While [we definitely support](#) good library systems, democratic socialists’ vision of a better society and how to achieve it goes much further.

The world we live in now is called a democracy; the United States is the wealthiest country in all of human history, and we all learn about how important of an American value “freedom” is. But the United States today is defined not by freedom and abundance, but exploitation and oppression.

A tiny number of rich and powerful families lives off of the profits they make from trashing the environment and underpaying, overworking, and cheating the vast majority of society — the working class. They get richer precisely because the poor and working class get poorer.

This capitalist class turns workplaces into [mini-authoritarian regimes](#),

where bosses have the power to harass and abuse workers. And they protect their power in all corners of society by fanning the flames of racial, national, and gender conflict and prejudice in order to divide working people and stop us from organizing.

Democratic socialists want to end all of that.

Like many progressives, we want to build a world where everyone has a right to food, healthcare, a good home, an enriching education, and a union job that pays well. We think this kind of economic security is necessary for people to live rich and creative lives — and to be truly free.

We want to guarantee all of this while stopping climate change and building an economy that's ecologically sustainable. We want to build a world without war, where people in other countries are free from the fear of US military intervention and economic exploitation. And we want to end mass incarceration and police brutality, gender violence, intolerance towards queer people, job and housing discrimination, deportations, and all other forms of oppression.

Unlike many progressives however, we've come to the conclusion that to build this better world it's going to take a lot more work than winning an election and passing incremental reforms.

What We're Up Against

The democracy we live in falls far short of what we're taught to believe it should be. In our society, normal people — when they're not organized — have [next to no power](#).

Instead, power is determined by what political scientist Thomas Ferguson calls the “golden rule”: those with the gold rule. Capitalists use their wealth to buy politicians from both parties and their lobbying power to kill progressive legislation that threatens their profits.

And even if we could elect a well-meaning government that could withstand the pressure of lobbyists, chances are they would eventually cave under the capitalists’ trump card: [a capital strike](#). To oppose new social programs and redistribution, the capitalist class can, as a last resort, withhold their investments and provoke a recession, undermining the social support of a progressive government.

This reflects another key problem under capitalism: not only do capitalists exploit workers on the job and hoard all the wealth they steal from us, but they have the power to determine whether or not we have

jobs and thus the ability to provide for ourselves. If capitalists don't like our democratic demands to, say, stop polluting the planet or pay workers a living wage, they can simply pull their investments and move their jobs to another state or country — and we have little recourse to stop them.

In rare instances — usually following massive wars and economic crises — progressive governments have been able to win victories. The Scandinavian countries are what we call “social democracies,” societies with robust social safety nets and labor movements that check the worst tendencies of capitalism and limit the power of the wealthy in key ways.

Over the course of the twentieth century, workers in these countries won full employment, a strong welfare state, and high levels of unionization. But they never successfully challenged the source of capitalist class power: their ownership rights over the major national corporations.

As a result, in the last thirty or so years, a reinvigorated capitalist class in these countries has led a persistent and successful campaign to roll back these progressive achievements. These failed progressive experiments show that our democratic socialist vision has to go far beyond the narrow limits that today's newly minted socialism experts on cable news will allow.

That's not because we are gluttons for politically difficult tasks, or because we are political purists. If we could win the better world that progressives, social democrats, and democratic socialists all want without challenging and eventually eliminating the power of capitalists, we'd happily take the easier route.

It's precisely because it's not so easy to change the world under capitalism that we are socialists.

The Democratic Road to Socialism

It's one thing to know what democratic socialists fight for, and another to lay out a convincing path to realizing it. This is where democratic socialists truly differ with some of our friends on the socialist left. We reject strategies that transplant paths from Russia in 1917 or Cuba in 1959 to the United States today, as if we could win socialism by storming the White House and tossing Donald Trump out on the front lawn.

What's needed is a strategy that takes seriously the particular challenges and opportunities that come with organizing in a liberal

democracy.

It's why we focus on [uniting all working-class people](#). Workers — everyone who makes their way in the world by working rather than skimming off the profits generated by other people, from factory and construction workers to teachers and nurses and white-collar office workers — have the strongest material interests in fighting capitalism, the power to stop production in workplaces and bring the capitalist system to a halt, and (as the vast majority of society) the potential power in numbers to overturn the political system.

And it's why we believe in a democratic road to socialism — one that builds movements *and* contests elections.

Bernie Sanders made a point endlessly in 2016: a “political revolution” in the United States will only happen if we can build mass movements, especially the labor movement. These movements have the potential to win concessions from capitalists and politicians. And through struggle, we can begin to [transform people’s consciousness](#) — by spreading an awareness that we can win if we organize together.

New possibilities that seem fantastic now will become real in the process. As people's expectations rise, they will realize what it will take to win a better life. And as the capacity of our movements grows, people will realize that they actually have the power to make those changes.

Alongside this movement work, we have to [start contesting elections](#) as insurgents who challenge the political leadership of both major parties. This work will lay the foundation for building [a political party of our own](#), one with a mass social base that eventually can fight to elect a socialist government.

But because of the capitalist's class's immense power, we know that electing a socialist government alone won't be the same as winning the power needed to transform society. A socialist government would have to see its primary task as taking away the power of the capitalist class.

That will mean [nationalizing the financial sector](#) so that major investment decisions are made by democratically elected governments and removing hostile elements in the military and police. It will mean introducing democratic planning and social ownership over corporations (though the correct mix of state-led planning and “market socialism,” a mix of publicly-owned firms, small privately-owned businesses, and worker cooperatives, is a matter of [some debate](#) in our movement). And it will mean rebuilding our democracy by instituting public financing of

elections, a ban on corporate lobbying and private campaign donations, and even more radical demands like [writing a new constitution](#).

Even with such an ambitious agenda, a socialist government will come under immense pressure from the capitalist class to back off. Bold twentieth-century attempts to check corporate power and redistribute wealth, as in countries like [France](#), [Jamaica](#), and [Sweden](#), all came up against that pressure, often in ways that severely weakened or sank reform efforts. We know that in some cases, like when Salvador Allende tried to [put Chile on a democratic road to socialism](#) in the early 1970s, the ruling class has even stopped tolerating the norms of liberal democracy.

At that moment, it will be the job of democratic socialists in movements and in government to [do everything necessary](#) to defend the democratic mandate they won.

This brings us back to the critical importance of building the power of working-class movements, the all-important complement to the state power exercised by a socialist government.

Such movements can hold socialist governments accountable, helping them resist the pressure to give in to capital. But those movements also have to act on their own initiative in a transitional period to democratize workplaces and communities. Through building bottom-up, democratic social movements, we can not only build the power we need to defeat the wealthy, but build the kind of democratic institutions that would be central to the future socialist society we want to live in.

Only by combining a committed socialist government and a powerful, self-organized working class can we take on the capitalist class from above and below.

Our Tasks Today

The democratic road to socialism is a long one. We know that in the United States we have years of hard work ahead of us. And in the short term, beating back the right-wing populist politics of Donald Trump has to be a top priority.

Our most important, immediate task as democratic socialists is to build the power of social movements.

We are active builders of movements against deportations, police brutality, pipelines, and war. We build support for [wildly popular universal demands](#) like [Medicare for All](#) and [rent control](#). We work to link

up with and help build movements of rank-and-file workers in unions fighting to make the labor movement [militant, progressive, and democratic](#) — including projects like [Labor Notes](#), [Teamsters for a Democratic Union](#), and [committees of rebellious educators](#) in teachers unions across the country.

We also support building the [broadest alliances possible](#), without sacrificing our principles, to elect candidates who support our immediate demands.

We know not everyone on the progressive left agrees with us yet that beating right-wing forces in the United States and building a better society will take the far-reaching changes that we think are necessary. And many have not come to the same conclusion we have that [the leadership of the Democratic Party is in the pocket of big business](#) and criminally incompetent (although after the 2016 disaster, many others now agree). In the short term, then, the task of democratic socialists in elections is to support campaigns that fight to improve the lives of working people and build working-class power.

Some of our candidates — like [Julia Salazar](#) in New York City and [Jovanka Beckles](#) in California — are democratic socialists. Others might be more accurately called “social democrats” because they believe in checking the worst of capitalism but don’t share our perspective about the need to go beyond it.

But what all of our candidates have in common is support for Medicare for All, labor rights, a higher minimum wage, environmental protections, stopping deportations, and ending mass incarceration. In fighting for these reforms, our goal is to get millions of people who have given up on politics to join the struggle, test the limits of what concessions can be won in the here and now, and to persuade our co-fighters on the progressive left that a more ambitious, socialist strategy is needed to build the kind of world we all want to live in.

The Rise of DSA

This might feel like a daunting task. But the prospects for democratic socialist politics today looks brighter than they have in half a century.

Thanks to the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and to the [meteoric rise](#) of the [Democratic Socialists of America](#) (DSA), which is now at 45,000 dues-paying members and rising, thousands of activists across the country are carrying out these tasks; millions more identify as socialists.

The emergence of an organized socialist movement is a gamechanger in US politics. Until recently, the Left downplayed the importance of political organizations, preferring a “movement of movements” perspective that never added up to more than the sum of its parts. And within organizations, activists tended to embrace a “horizontalist” politics that rejected elected leadership and democratic decision-making structures. In its place, a “[tyranny of structurelessness](#),” in which organizations seemed to be nonhierarchical but came to be dominated by a small number of unelected and unaccountable leaders, reigned.

That was a mistake. Socialist organizations like DSA are essential for doing the day-to-day work of developing and popularizing a long-term political strategy, winning and then educating new activists, and helping turn members into leaders.

Our organization is also a rare creature in the United States: one that is truly democratic and member-run. This is crucial to our mission.

Ultimately, socialist organizations like DSA and a revitalized labor movement will need to come together to build a new political party of millions that can lead the fight for a better world. But DSA is an important starting point.

For now, democratic socialists’ tasks are clear. Link up with movements in the United States and around the world fighting against exploitation, domination, and war. Build our forces. Win elections. Achieve all that we can under capitalism. And build a consensus that we need a real political revolution to go beyond it.

Our ranks are open to all those who are ready to fight. Together, we have a democratic socialist world to win.



The ABCs of Socialism



EDITED BY
Bhaskar Sunkara

ILLUSTRATED BY
Phil Wrigglesworth

*Isn't America already
kind of socialist?*





Chris Maisano

If you spend much time on social media, you've probably seen the memes purporting to show just how socialist the United States already is by listing a bunch of government programs, services, and agencies. There are many variations on the theme, but my favorite one lists no less than fifty-five ostensibly socialist programs whose only commonality is that Uncle Sam carries them all out.

Some directly serve social needs and involve some measure of income redistribution (public libraries, welfare, the WIC program, Social Security, food stamps). Some seem thrown in for no good reason at all (Amber Alerts? The White House?). Others are basic operational activities that any modern government, regardless of its ideological orientation, would carry out (the census, fire departments, garbage and snow removal, sewers, street lighting). And still others involve the vast apparatus of coercion and force (police departments, the

So long as the fundamental structures of the economy remain unchanged, state action will disproportionately benefit capitalist interests at the expense of everything else.

FBI, the CIA, the military, courts, prisons, and jails).

For all of Bernie Sanders's virtues, his campaign for president has only thickened the fog of ideological confusion. At one campaign stop last year, he endorsed the thinking behind the most simplistic of these memes: "When you go to your public library, when you call your fire department or the police department, what do you think you're calling? These are socialist institutions." By that logic any sort of collective project funded by tax dollars and accomplished through government action is socialism.

It's not difficult to see the problem with this line of thinking. In a country as deeply and reflexively anti-statist as the United States, the identification of socialism with government is perhaps the worst possible rhetorical strategy the Left could adopt. "Like the DMV? Then You'll Love Socialism!" isn't a slogan that will win many converts. More importantly, conflating all government action with socialism forces us to defend many of the most objectionable forms of state activity, including

Isn't America already kind of socialist?



those that we would want to abolish in a free and just society.

It's one thing to identify public libraries with socialism. They operate according to democratic principles of access and distribution, providing services to all regardless of one's ability to pay. They would be one of the most important institutions in any socialist society worthy of the name. But it's quite another to include the police. If the forces responsible for killing Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and Rekia Boyd exemplify socialism in action, then no person who wants freedom and justice should be a socialist.

The idea that any government activity is synonymous with socialism has major political and strategic implications. After all, if our country were already at least partly socialist, then all we would have to do is keep gradually expanding government. We wouldn't have to change the purpose of any existing programs, nor would we have to reform the administrative structures of government agencies.

And because all of those purportedly socialist programs have been won without fundamentally challenging private property, there would be no need for a decisive confrontation with the owners of capital and their political allies. All we would have to do is elect sympathetic politicians to office and let them legislate their way to even more socialism.

Academics who study politics for a living often fall into this trap. By simply looking at the size of government in terms of overall spending, many argue that the US is becoming increasingly socialist whether it wants to or not. In their view major social reforms will happen willy-nilly, with a

passive populace coming to support successful programs only after they have been legislated by politicians and implemented by bureaucrats.

Government spending on social programs and other activities may well increase in the coming decades because of the aging population, the climate crisis, and other developments. But the sheer volume of spending tells us little about the political valence of government action. Key questions about that state activity always need to be asked: does it reinforce or undermine the power of those who own capital? Does it increase our subordination to market discipline or offer us more freedom from its demands?

There have been a number of large-scale government initiatives since the 1980s, even during periods of Republican political dominance. But many of the biggest programs over the last few decades do nothing to strengthen the power of workers.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has brought much-needed relief to the working poor, but it also serves as an indirect subsidy for low-wage employers. Medicare Part D offers some subsidies to low-income seniors, but it's widely recognized as a costly giveaway to the prescription drug industry.

Obamacare has increased health insurance coverage, partially through the (contested) expansion of Medicaid. But the individual mandate only serves to deepen marketization, adding millions of Americans to the private, for-profit insurance system. The 2009 stimulus plan likely saved the country from another Great Depression, but it was inadequate to the scale of the crisis and weighted in favor of

Isn't America already kind of socialist?



tax cuts for businesses who simply pocketed the cash instead of hiring new workers. The list goes on.

Why does this happen? For one thing, the rich and powerful invest heavily in political activity to promote their interests and block progressive reforms. By the end of last year, the contributions of just 158 families and the companies they own (a staggering \$176 million) made up about half the total funding in the 2016 presidential race. Through their political spending and the influence it buys, they have been able to shape tax and other policies for their own benefit, an advantage reinforced by favorable judicial decisions (e.g. *Citizens United*) and lobbying activities.

According to a widely noted 2014 study by two political scientists, the political dominance of the wealthy is now so pronounced that average citizens exercise “near zero” influence over government policymaking.

The middle and upper classes also hold the most important posts in government, elected and appointed alike. They share a common set of ideas and values predicated on protecting the status quo and repressing any major challenge to that system, particularly those that come from the working class and the Left.

These direct forms of influence are not the only way that powerful interests shape government action. After all, governments are dependent on some minimally robust level of economic activity to fund themselves. The tax revenues or debt financing governments rely on are directly related to the state of the capitalist economy and its rates of growth and profitability. If the level of economic activity declines — perhaps, because capitalists are unhappy about new

legislation that benefits workers — the state will find it increasingly difficult to fund its activities. This in turn leads to a decline in its legitimacy and its level of popular support.

Because economic activity is significantly determined by the investment decisions of private capitalists, these forces can essentially veto government policies that they think are against their interests. Often, if capitalists aren’t induced to make investments through business subsidies and other incentives, they simply will refuse to invest.

Consequently, there is a strong tendency for politicians and bureaucrats to align their policy decisions with the interests of capitalists in the private sector. Preserving “business confidence” is a major constraint on the formation of policy, and is one of the main reasons why government action is so often favorable to capitalist interests. It’s also how they’re able to conflate their own interests with a larger “public” or “national” interest — under a capitalist system, there’s some truth to their claim.

In the absence of popular organization and militancy, government action will do little to shift the balance of power away from capital and toward labor, or to undermine market discipline instead of deepening it. So long as the fundamental structures of the economy remain unchanged, state action will disproportionately benefit capitalist interests at the expense of everything else.

This is not to say that progressive reforms can never be won under capitalism, or that the government is completely immune to public pressure. However, such reforms



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have only been won with the support of direct, mass struggles against employers.

Simply electing politicians to office or watching the government expand by its own momentum has never been, and never will be, enough. Economic power is political power, and under capitalism the owners of capital will always have the capacity to undermine popular democracy — no matter who's in Congress or the White House.

Winning government power and using it to break the dominance of the capitalist class is a necessary condition for beginning the transition to socialism. A government run by a socialist party (or a coalition of left and working-class parties) would move to bring the economy's key industries and enterprises under some form of social control. But that alone wouldn't be sufficient. The bitter experiences of the twentieth century have taught us that socialism won't further the cause of human freedom if the political and administrative structures of government aren't thoroughly democratized.

Here is where continued popular mobilization outside (and, if necessary, against) formal political structures becomes absolutely crucial. In order to withstand the inevitable backlash from capitalist and conservative forces, a socialist transition would need to draw on mass popular support and direct participation in the affairs of government.

This would entail not only creating directly democratic bodies that supplant or complement representative institutions like Congress, but dramatically overhauling state agencies and administrative structures. Such an expansion of popular power would be needed to both push out personnel committed to the old regime and to transform the often alienating and repressive bureaucracies that currently administer public services.

Public schools, welfare departments, planning agencies, courts, and all other government agencies would invite workers and recipients to participate in the design and implementation of those services. Public-sector unions could play a key role in this endeavor, organizing both the providers and users of public services to radically transform the administrative structures of government.

Only under these conditions would government activity be synonymous with democratic socialism. Instead of posing an abstract concept of "government" against the forces of capital, we should begin the hard work of conceiving and building new institutions that can make government of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality. ■



No, socialism isn't just more government — it's about democratic ownership and control.



But at least capitalism is free and democratic, right?





Erik Olin Wright

In the United States, many take for granted that freedom and democracy are inextricably connected with capitalism. Milton Friedman, in his book *Capitalism and Freedom*, went so far as to argue that capitalism was a necessary condition for both.

It is certainly true that the appearance and spread of capitalism brought with it a tremendous expansion of individual freedoms and, eventually, popular struggles for more democratic forms of political organization. The claim that capitalism fundamentally obstructs both freedom and democracy will then sound strange to many.

To say that capitalism restricts the flourishing of these values is not to argue that capitalism has run counter to freedom and democracy in every instance. Rather, through the functioning of its most basic processes, capitalism generates severe deficits of both freedom and democracy that it can never remedy. Capitalism has promoted

The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View
Ellen Meiksins Wood • Verso, 2002

the emergence of certain limited forms of freedom and democracy, but it imposes a low ceiling on their further realization.

At the core of these values is self-determination: the belief that people should be able to decide the conditions of their own lives to the fullest extent possible. When an action by a person affects only that person, then he or she ought to be able to engage in that activity without asking permission from anyone else. This is the context of freedom. But when an action affects the lives of others, then these other people should have a say in the activity. This is the context of democracy. In both, the paramount concern is that people retain as much control as possible over the shape their lives will take.

In practice, virtually every choice a person makes will have some effect on others. It is impossible for everyone to contribute to every decision that concerns them, and any social system that insisted on such comprehensive democratic participation would impose an unbearable burden on people. What we need, therefore, is a set of rules to distinguish between questions of freedom and those of democracy. In our society, such a distinction is usually made with reference to the boundary between the private and public spheres.

There is nothing natural or spontaneous about this line between the private and the public; it is forged and maintained by social processes. The tasks entailed by these processes are complex and often contested. The state vigorously enforces some public/private boundaries and leaves others to be upheld or dissolved as social norms. Often the boundary between the public and the private remains fuzzy. In

But at least capitalism is free and democratic, right?



a fully democratic society, the boundary itself is subject to democratic deliberation.

Capitalism constructs the boundary between the public and private spheres in a way that constrains the realization of true individual freedom and reduces the scope of meaningful democracy. There are five ways in which this is readily apparent.

1. “Work or Starve” Isn’t Freedom

Capitalism is anchored in the private accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of income through the market. The economic inequalities that result from these “private” activities are intrinsic to capitalism and create inequalities in what the philosopher Philippe van Parijs calls “real freedom.”

Whatever else we might mean by freedom, it must include the ability to say “no.” A wealthy person can freely decide not to work for wages; a poor person without an independent means of livelihood cannot do so easily.

But the value of freedom goes deeper than this. It is also the ability to act positively on one’s life plans — to choose not just an answer, but the question itself.

The children of wealthy parents can take unpaid internships to advance their careers; the children of poor parents cannot.

Capitalism deprives many people of real freedom in this sense. Poverty in the midst of plenty exists because of a direct equation between material resources and the resources needed for self-determination.

2. Capitalists Decide

The way the boundary between the public and private spheres is drawn in capitalism

excludes crucial decisions, which affect large numbers of people, from democratic control. Perhaps the most fundamental right that accompanies private ownership of capital is the right to decide to invest and disinvest strictly on the basis of self-interest.

A corporation’s decision to move production from one place to another is a private matter, even though it makes a radical impact on the lives of everyone in both places. Even if one argues that this concentration of power in private hands is necessary for the efficient allocation of resources, the exclusion of these kinds of decisions from democratic control unequivocally decimates the capacity for self-determination by all except the owners of capital.

3. Nine to Five Is Tyranny

Capitalist firms are allowed to be organized as workplace dictatorships. An essential component of a business owner’s power is the right to tell employees what to do. That is the basis of the employment contract: the job seeker agrees to follow the employer’s orders in exchange for a wage.

Of course, an employer is also free to grant workers considerable autonomy, and in some situations this is the profit-maximizing way of organizing work. But such autonomy is given or withheld at the owner’s pleasure. No robust conception of self-determination would allow autonomy to depend on the private preferences of elites.

A defender of capitalism might reply that a worker who doesn’t like the boss’s rule can always quit. But since workers

But at least capitalism is free and democratic, right?



by definition lack an independent means of livelihood, if they quit they will have to look for a new job and, to the extent that the available employment is in capitalist firms, they will still be subject to a boss's dictates.

4. Governments Have to Serve the Interests of Private Capitalists

Private control over major investment decisions creates a constant pressure on public authorities to enact rules favorable to the interests of capitalists. The threat of disinvestment and capital mobility is always in the background of public policy discussions, and thus politicians, whatever their ideological orientation, are forced to worry about sustaining a “good business climate.”

Democratic values are hollow so long as one class of citizens takes priority over all others.

5. Elites Control the Political System

Finally, wealthy people have greater access than others to political power. This is the case in all capitalist democracies, although wealth-based inequality of political power is much greater in some countries than in others.

The specific mechanisms for this greater access are quite varied: contributions to political campaigns; financing lobbying efforts; elite social networks of various sorts; and outright bribes and other forms of corruption.

In the United States it is not only wealthy individuals, but also capitalist corporations, that face no meaningful restriction on their

ability to deploy private resources for political purposes. This differential access to political power voids the most basic principle of democracy.

• • •

These consequences are endemic to capitalism as an economic system. This does not mean that they cannot sometimes be mitigated in capitalist societies. In different times and places, many policies have been erected to compensate for capitalism's deformation of freedom and democracy.

Public constraints can be imposed on private investment in ways that erode the rigid boundary between the public and private; a strong public sector and active forms of state investment can weaken the threat of capital mobility; restrictions on the use of private wealth in elections and the public finance of political campaigns can reduce the privileged access of the wealthy to political power; labor law can strengthen the collective power of workers in both the political arena and the workplace; and a wide variety of welfare policies can increase the real freedom of those without access to private wealth.

When the political conditions are right, the anti-democratic and freedom-impeding features of capitalism can be palliated, but they cannot be eliminated. Taming capitalism in this way has been the central objective of the policies advocated by socialists within capitalist economies the world over.

But if freedom and democracy are to be fully realized, capitalism must not merely be tamed. It must be overcome.



It might seem that way, but genuine freedom and democracy aren't compatible with capitalism.

Socialism sounds good in theory, but doesn't human nature make it impossible to realize?





Adaner Usmani
& Bhaskar Sunkara

“Good in theory, bad in practice.” People who profess interest in socialism and the idea of a society without exploitation and hierarchy are often met with this dismissive reply. Sure, the concept sounds nice, but people aren’t very nice, right? Isn’t capitalism much more suited to human nature — a nature dominated by competitiveness and venality?

Socialists don’t believe these truisms. They don’t view history as a mere chronicle of cruelty and selfishness. They also see countless acts of empathy, reciprocity, and love. People are complex: they do unspeakable things, but they also engage in remarkable acts of kindness and, even in difficult situations, show deep regard for others.

This does not mean that we’re plastic — that there is no such thing as human nature. Progressives do sometimes make this claim, often arguing with those who see people as walking, talking utility-maximizers.

Despite its good intentions, this reproach goes too far.

For at least two reasons, socialists are committed to the view that all humans share some important interests. The first is a moral one. Socialists’ indictment of how today’s societies fail to provide necessities like food and shelter in a world of plenty, or stunt the development of people locked into thankless, grueling, low-paying jobs, rests on a core belief (stated or not) about the impulses and interests that animate people everywhere.

Our outrage that individuals are denied the right to live free and full lives is anchored in the idea that people are inherently creative and curious, and that capitalism too often stifles these qualities. Simply put, we strive for a freer and more fulfilling world because everyone, everywhere, cares about their freedom and fulfillment.

But this is not the only reason why socialists are interested in humanity’s universal drives. Having a conception of human nature also helps us make sense of the world around us. And by helping us to interpret the world, it aids our efforts to change it, as well.

We strive for a freer and more fulfilling world because everyone, everywhere, cares about their freedom and fulfilment.

Does human nature makes socialism impossible?



One of our principal tasks as socialists is to help make collective action a viable choice for even more people.

Marx famously said that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Resistance to exploitation and oppression is a constant throughout history — it is as much a part of human nature as competitiveness, or greed. The world around us is filled with instances of people defending their lives and dignity. And while social structures may shape and constrain individual agency, there are no structures that steamroll people’s rights and freedoms without inviting resistance.

Of course, the history of all “hitherto existing society” is also a record of passivity and even acquiescence. Mass collective action against exploitation and oppression is rare. If humans everywhere are committed to defending their individual interests, why don’t we resist more?

Well, the view that all people have incentives to demand freedom and fulfillment does not imply that they will always have the capacity to do so. Changing the world is no easy feat. Under ordinary circumstances, the risks associated with acting collectively often seem overwhelming.

For example, workers who choose to join a union or go on strike to improve their working conditions may invite the scrutiny of their bosses and even lose their jobs.

12043
The Communist Manifesto
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels • 1848

Collective action requires many different individuals to decide to take these risks together, so it’s not surprising that it is uncommon and mostly fleeting.

Put differently, socialists don’t believe that the absence of mass movements is a sign that people have no inherent desire to fight back, or worse, that they don’t even recognize what their interests are. Rather, protest is uncommon because people are smart. They know that in the present political moment change is a risky, distant hope, so they develop other strategies to get by.

But sometimes people do step up and take risks. They organize and build progressive movements from below. History is filled with examples of people fighting against exploitation, and one of our principal tasks as socialists is to support these movements, to help make collective action a viable choice for even more people.

In this effort — and the struggle to define the values of a more just society — we will be aided, not hurt, by our shared nature. ■

23500
Uniting the Dispossessed
Bryan D. Palmer • Jacobin • 7.22.2015

23847
The Second American Revolution
Bruce Levine • Jacobin • Issue 18



*Our shared nature
actually helps us build
and define the values
of a more just society.*

*Will socialists take my
Kenny Loggins records?*





Bhaskar Sunkara

John Lennon's iconic 1971 single "Imagine" asks listeners to envision a world without possessions, one without greed or hunger, in which the Earth's treasures are shared by all humanity. It's not surprising that the song became an anthem for generations of dreamers, but it also captures something about the socialist vision — the powerful desire to end misery and oppression, and help every person reach their fullest potential.

But the picture painted by Lennon's song might be a bit worrying for those of us who don't want a world without personal possessions — a sort of global commune where we're forced to wear hemp bracelets and share our Kenny Loggins records.

Thankfully, socialists are not interested in collectivizing your music. It's not because we don't love Loggins. We simply don't want a world without personal property — the things meant for individual consumption. Instead, socialists strive for

a society without private property — the things that give the people who own them power over those who don't.

The power created by private property is expressed most clearly in the labor market, where business owners get to decide who deserves a job and who doesn't, and are able to impose working conditions that, if given a fair alternative, ordinary people would otherwise reject. And even though workers do most of the actual work at a job, owners have unilateral say over how profits are divided up and don't compensate employees for all the value they produce. Socialists call this phenomenon exploitation.

Exploitation is not unique to capitalism. It's around in any class society, and simply means that some people are compelled to labor under the direction of, and for the benefit of, others.

Compared to systems of slavery or serfdom, the hardships many workers face today are less immediately obvious. In most countries they have real legal protections and can afford basic necessities — a result of battles won by labor movements to limit the scope and intensity of exploitation.

But exploitation is only ever mitigated in capitalism, never eliminated. Consider this (admittedly abstract) example: let's say that you're getting paid \$15 an hour by a business owner in a stable, profitable firm. You've been working there five years, and you put in about sixty hours a week.

No matter what your job is like — whether it's easy or grueling, boring or exciting — one thing is certain: your labor is making more (probably a lot more) than \$15 an hour for your boss. That persistent difference between what you produce and

Will socialists take my Kenny Loggins records?



Radically changing things would mean taking away the source of capitalists' power: the private ownership of property.

what you get back in return is exploitation — a key source of profits and wealth in capitalism.

And, of course, with your paycheck you're forced to buy all the things necessary for a good life — housing, health care, child-care, a college education — which are also commodities, produced by other workers who are not fully remunerated for their efforts either.

Radically changing things would mean taking away the source of capitalists' power: the private ownership of property.

In a socialist society — even one in which markets are retained in spheres like consumer goods — you and your fellow workers wouldn't spend your day making others rich. You would keep much more of the value you produced. This could translate into more material comfort, or, alternatively, the possibility of deciding to work less with no loss in compensation so you could go to school or take up a hobby.

This might seem like a pipe dream, but it's entirely plausible. Workers at all levels of design, production, and delivery know how to make the things society needs — they do it every day. They can run their workplaces collectively, cutting out the

middle-men who own private property. Indeed, democratic control over our workplaces and the other institutions that shape our communities is the key to ending exploitation.

That's the socialist vision: abolishing private ownership of the things we all need and use — factories, banks, offices, natural resources, utilities, communication and transportation infrastructure — and replacing it with social ownership, thereby undercutting the power of elites to hoard wealth and power. And that's also the ethical appeal of socialism: a world where people don't try to control others for personal gain, but instead cooperate so that everyone can flourish.

As for personal property, you can keep your Kenny Loggins records.

In fact, in a society free from the destructive economic busts endemic to capitalism, with more employment security, and necessities removed from the sphere of the market, your record collection would be free from the danger zone because you wouldn't have to pawn it for rent money.

That's socialism in a nutshell: less John Lennon, more Kenny Loggins. ■



*Socialists want a world
without private property,
not personal property.
You can keep your terrible
music.*

*Will socialism
be boring?*





Danny Katch

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

This is not my version of 2081, but Kurt Vonnegut's in the opening lines of his "Harrison Bergeron," a short story about a future in which everyone is the same. Attractive people are forced to wear masks, smart people have earpieces that regularly distract their thoughts with loud noises, and so on.

As one would expect with Vonnegut, there are some darkly hilarious moments — such as a ballet performance in which the dancers are shackled with leg weights — but



unlike most of his stories, "Harrison Bergeron" is based on a reactionary premise: equality can only be achieved by reducing the most talented down to the mediocre ranks of the masses.

Socialism has often been portrayed in science fiction in these types of gray dystopian terms, which reflect the ambivalence that many artists have toward capitalism. Artists are often repulsed by the anti-human values and commercialized culture of their society, but they are also aware that they have a unique status within it that allows them to express their creative individuality — as long as it sells. They fear that socialism would strip them of that status and reduce them to the level of mere workers, because they are unable to imagine a world that values and encourages the artistic expression of all of its members.

Of course there's another reason that socialist societies are imagined to be grim and dreary: most of the societies that have called themselves socialist have been grim and dreary. Shortly after the revolutions in Eastern Europe that ended the domination of the Soviet Union, the Rolling Stones played a legendary concert in Prague in which they were welcomed as cultural heroes.

The catch is that this was 1990, Mick and Keith were almost fifty, and it had been years since their most recent hit, a song called "Harlem Shuffle" that is god-awful. Forget about the censored books and the bans on demonstrations. If you want to understand how boring Stalinist society was, watch the video for "Harlem Shuffle" and then think about one of the coolest cities in Europe going out of its mind with joy at the chance to see those guys.



**To be an effective socialist,
it is extremely helpful to
like human beings.**

Does it really matter if socialism is boring? Perhaps it seems silly, even offensive, to be concerned about such a trivial matter compared to the horrors that capitalism inflicts all the time. Think about the dangers of increasing hurricanes and wildfires caused by climate change, the trauma of losing your home or your job, or the insecurity of not knowing if the man sitting next to you sees you as a target for date rape. We like watching movies about the end of the world or people facing adversity, but in our actual lives most of us prefer predictability and routine.

Worrying that socialism might be boring can seem like the ultimate “white people problem,” as the Internet likes to say. Sure it would be nice to eliminate poverty, war, and racism ... but what if I get bored?

But it does matter, of course, because we don’t want to live in a society without creativity and excitement, and also because if those things are being stifled then there must be a certain ruling clique or class that is doing the stifling — whether or not they think it’s for our own good. Finally, if socialism is stale and static, it will never be able to replace capitalism, which can accurately be called many nasty things, but boring is not one of them.

Capitalism has revolutionized the world many times over in the past two hundred years and changed how we think, look, communicate, and work. Just in the past few decades, this system adapted quickly and effectively to the global wave of protests and strikes in the sixties and seventies: unionized factories were closed and relocated to other corners of the world, the stated role of government was shifted from helping people to helping corporations help people, and finally all these changes and others as well were sold to us as what the protesters had been fighting for all along — a world in which every man, woman, and child is born with the equal right to buy as many smartphones and factory-ripped jeans as they want.

Capitalism can reinvent itself far more quickly than any previous economic order. “Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form,” write Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, is “the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the capitalist epoch from all earlier ones.” While earlier class societies desperately tried to maintain the status quo, capitalism thrives on overturning it.

The result is a world in constant motion. Yesterday’s factory district is today’s slum is tomorrow’s hipster neighborhood. All that is solid melts into air. That’s another line from the *Manifesto* and also the name of a wonderful book by Marshall Berman, who writes that to live in modern capitalism is “to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy,

Will socialism be boring?



growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.”

Yet most of our lives are far from exciting. We work for bosses who want us to be mindless drones. Even when a cool, new invention comes to our workplace, we can count on it to eventually be used to make us do more work in less time, which might arouse the passions of management, but will only fill our days with more drudgery.

Outside of work, it's the same story. Schools see their primary role as providing “career readiness,” which is an inoffensive phrase that means getting kids prepared to handle the bullshit of work. Even the few hours that are supposed to be our own are mostly spent on laundry, cooking, cleaning, checking homework, and all the other necessary tasks to get ourselves and our families ready for work the next day.

Most of us only experience the excitement of capitalism as something happening somewhere else: new gadgets for rich people, wild parties for celebrities, amazing performances to watch from your couch. On the bright side, at least most of it is better than “Harlem Shuffle.”

Even worse, when we do get to directly touch the excitement, it's usually because we're on the business end of it. It's our jobs being replaced by that incredible new robot, our rent becoming too expensive ever since the beautiful luxury tower was built across the street. Adding insult to injury, we are then told if we complain that we are standing in the way of progress.

The sacrifice of individuals in the name of societal progress is said to be one of

the horrors of socialism, a world run by faceless bureaucrats supposedly acting for the common good. But there are plenty of invisible and unelected decision-makers under capitalism, from health insurance officials who don't know us but can determine whether our surgery is “necessary” to billionaire-funded foundations that declare schools they have never visited to be “failures.”

Socialism also involves plenty of change, upheaval, and even chaos, but this chaos, as Hal Draper might have said, comes from below. During the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik-led Soviet government removed marriage from the control of the church one month after taking power and allowed couples to get divorced at the request of either partner.

These laws dramatically changed family dynamics and women's lives, as evidenced by some of the song lyrics that became popular in rural Russian villages:

Time was when my husband used his fists and force. But now he is so tender. For he fears divorce. I no longer fear my husband. If we can't cooperate, I will take myself to court, and we will separate.

Of course, divorce can be heartbreakingly well as liberating. Revolutions cast everything in a new light, from our leaders to our loved ones, which can be both exciting and excruciating. “Gigantic events,” wrote Trotsky in a 1923 newspaper article, “have descended on the family in its old shape, the war and the revolution. And following them came creeping slowly the underground mole — critical thought, the conscious study and evaluation of family relations

Will socialism be boring?



and forms of life. No wonder that this process reacts in the most intimate and hence most painful way on family relationships.”

In another article, Trotsky described daily experience in revolutionary Russia as “the process by which everyday life for the working masses is being broken up and formed anew.” Like capitalism, these first steps toward socialism offered both the promise of creation and the threat of destruction, but with the crucial difference that the people Trotsky wrote about were playing an active role in determining how their world was changing.

They were far from having complete control, especially over the mass poverty and illiteracy that the tsar and world war had bequeathed to them. But even in these miserable conditions, the years between the October Revolution and Stalin’s final consolidation of power demonstrated the excitement of a society in which new doors are open to the majority classes for the first time.

There was an explosion of art and culture. Cutting-edge painters and sculptors decorated the public squares of Russian cities with their futurist art. For the record, Lenin hated the futurists, but this didn’t stop the government from funding their journal, *Art of the Commune*. Ballets and theaters were opened up to mass audiences. Cultural groups and workers’ committees came together to bring art and artistic training into factories. The filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein gained world renown for the groundbreaking technique of his movies depicting the Russian Revolution.

The silly premise of “Harrison Bergeron” was refuted. Socialism didn’t find talented

artists to be a threat to “equality” or find a contradiction between appreciating individual artists and opening up the previously elitist art world to the masses of workers and peasants.

The possibilities of socialism that the world glimpsed in Russia for a few years were not a sterile experiment controlled by a handful of theorists but a messy and thrilling creation of tens of millions of people groping toward a different way of running society and treating one another, with all the skills, impediments, and neuroses they had acquired through living under capitalism, in the horrible circumstances of a poor, war-torn country. They screwed up in all sorts of ways, but they also showed that socialism is a real possibility, not a utopian dream that doesn’t fit the needs of real human beings.

And the society they were pointing toward was a place where equality meant not lowering but raising the overall cultural and intellectual level of society. In the many novels, movies, and other artistic renderings of socialism, there is little mention of rising divorce rates and heated debates about art. Most of them imagine societies without conflict, which is why they seem so creepy — including the ones intending to promote socialism.

A similar problem exists inside many protest movements today, in which some activists want to organize movements and meetings around a consensus model, which means that almost everybody present has to agree on a decision for it to get passed. Consensus can sometimes be an effective way to build trust among people who don’t know and trust one another, especially because most people in this supposedly

Will socialism be boring?



Most of us only experience the excitement of capitalism as something happening somewhere else: new gadgets for rich people, wild parties for celebrities, amazing performances to watch from your couch.

democratic society have almost no experience participating in the democratic process of discussion, debate, and then a majority-rule vote.

When organizers view consensus not only as a temporary tactic but as a model for how society should be run, however, there is a problem. I want to live in a democratic society with conflicts and arguments, where people aren't afraid to stand up for what they believe in and don't feel pressured to soften their opinions so that, when a compromise is reached, we can pretend that we all agreed in the first place. If your case for socialism rests on the idea that people will stop getting into arguments and even occasionally acting like jerks, you should probably find another cause.

Socialism isn't going to be created, Lenin once wrote, with "abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism. True, that is no easy matter, but no other approach

to this task is serious enough to warrant discussion."

To be an effective socialist, it is extremely helpful to like human beings. Not humanity as a concept but real, sweaty people. In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Berman tells a story about Robert Moses, the famous New York City public planner who flattened entire neighborhoods that stood in the way of the exact spots where he envisioned new highways. Moses, a friend once said, "loved the public, but not as people." He built parks, beaches, and highways for the masses to use, even as he loathed most of the working-class New Yorkers he encountered.

Loving the public but not people is also a feature of elitist socialists, whose faith rests more on five-year development plans, utopian blueprints, or winning future elections than on the wonders that hundreds of millions can achieve when they are inspired and liberated. That is why their visions for socialism are so lifeless and unimaginative.

By contrast, Marx, who is often presented as an isolated intellectual, was a rowdy, argumentative, funny, passionate person who once declared that his favorite saying was the maxim: "I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me." I find it hard to see how a world run by the majority of human beings, with all of our gloriously and infuriatingly different talents, personalities, madnesses, and passions, could possibly be boring. ■



*Socialism isn't about
inducing bland
mediocrity. It's about
unleashing the
creative potential of all.*





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The Road to Working Class Power: Permanent Revolution and the Proletarian State - YDSA

December 1, 2025 by Nikoli Weir

16–20 minutes

A clear, accessible walkthrough of Marx, Engels, and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, this piece explains why the working class must dismantle the capitalist state and build a new commune-state to achieve true emancipation and, ultimately, a classless society.



Illustration of the Paris Commune adapted from the century edition of Cassell's History of England, (ca. 1900)

The Manifesto of the Communist Party is a basic and brief outline of the tasks of the communist movement. This program can be summed up in two words: permanent revolution. Permanent revolution is often associated with the Bolshevik revolutionary Leon Trotsky, but it did not, in fact, begin with him. Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is actually derived from Marx and Engels. In an address given on behalf of the central committee of the Communist League shortly after they

completed the Manifesto, they say the following;

“While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is... our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and... the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes...” [1](#)

This, in brief, is the theory of permanent revolution that was espoused by not only Marx and Engels, but also Lenin and Trotsky, and which was first elaborated in the Communist Manifesto. In the Manifesto, it is presented as follows: “The Communist Revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations...the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class... The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest... all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class...” [2](#)

In other words, the working class must seize the state from the capitalists and use it for its own aims, to bring about a total transformation of society, and organize society around the needs of human beings rather than the needs of profit and finance. Once this has been completed, and class has been abolished, there will no longer be a need for a state, and it will, in the words of Friedrich Engels, “wither away.” This, however, is just the beginning of the theory of permanent revolution.



Vladimir Lenin addresses workers and soldiers in Red Square in 1919. Photo: Grigory Petrovich Goldstein, Red Square, Moscow, 1919. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Permanent revolution in its final evolution recognizes a problem with the idea of “seizing the state” that some of you may have already noticed; why would a state, even a working-class state, willingly abolish itself? This is a criticism that has been brought up time and time again, and it deserves attention. The truth of the matter is that the state as we know it today is entirely the product of capitalism; the feudal kingdoms and slave empires of the past have very little in common with today’s administrative state, with its bloated bureaucracies and byzantine legal systems. This is because the needs of industrial and post-industrial societies are far more complex than the needs of medieval, feudal societies. States are not static; they constantly evolve, devolve, grow, and shrink based on the conditions in which they find themselves.

At this point, it might be helpful to bring forward two general tendencies that manifest across all different kinds of states. These are two conceptions of the state which are frequently pitted against each other in sociology and political science, but there is no reason for this to be the case. They are as follows: first, the state is a monopoly on violence and force. This idea, first put forward by the sociologist Max Weber, basically means that in almost all circumstances, the state is the only entity that is allowed to initiate violence, whether against individuals or organizations.

For example, I may suspect that my neighbor is carrying out illegal

activities within his home, but this does not give me the legal authority to break down his door and hold him hostage. However, if I were to report my neighbor's activity to the state, and they believed that there was sufficient evidence to justify such a forcible search of his home, then they would send in the police, who have the legal right to carry it out. On a material level, there is no real difference between me and some other residents of the neighborhood getting together to break down my neighbor's door, and the police coming to do the same thing; they are the same act. The difference is that the police are representatives of the authority of the state, which is an entity that possesses, as said earlier, a monopoly on violence, a monopoly which is not held by me and the other residents of the neighborhood I live in.

With this idea of the monopoly on violence, Max Weber explains the basic element of the state, but he doesn't say anything about who the state represents. This is where Marx and Engels offer some clarification; the current state is a tool of class rule. It is the means by which a class exerts its power over the rest of society. This is the second conception of the state: the state as an organ of class domination. Because each social class has a fundamentally unique historical task, their states inevitably end up being different from one another. A feudal state, as mentioned earlier, will not be the same as a capitalist state, and a workers' state, sometimes called a workers' republic, will be different—both in ends and means—from a capitalist state.

So, the capitalist state is designed with the specific needs of the capitalist class in mind. The primary need of a capitalist is, of course, profit; the capitalist state is thus built to ensure a more or less constant flow of commerce; it is tasked with maintaining conditions that are suitable for business. It is this state which Marx says must be "seized" by the working class.

But again, we come upon a problem; how can the socialist revolution use for its own purposes a state which was designed to serve the interests of the class that it is attempting to defeat? There is only one answer to this question: a socialist revolution *cannot* use such a state for its own purposes. This is not something that Marx and Engels make clear in the Manifesto, because they had not yet grasped it.

The workers' state is not to be built on top of the already existing capitalist state. The capitalist state must be destroyed; this is the first task of the revolution. Then, a new state must be built. We must be cautious here; for revolutionary socialists, a new state is not the end goal; it is a means to the end, that end being the abolition of class. In

other words, the state is a temporary tool that is used by the working class and its party to ensure its own survival and victory. It is a state which derives its impetus not from above, but from below. In 1923, a few years into the Russian Revolution, Trotsky said that “we cannot afford to wait for everything to happen from above, as a result of government initiative. The new social structure must proceed simultaneously on all sides. The proletarian state is the structural timber, not the structure itself. The importance of revolutionary government in a period of transition is immeasurable...” but this “does not mean that all the work of building will be performed by the state. The fetish of the state, even though it be a proletarian one, does not become us as Marxists” ³

I find the metaphor used by Trotsky to be a very useful one; the workers’ state is not the final structure, it is the framework that exists to guide the building of it. The building of this structure, the new social order, must be spearheaded by the masses themselves. Their state, the workers’ state, exists to support and guide them in the task of construction. The workers’ state exists to serve the working people; the working people do not exist to serve the workers’ state.

It is not until 1871, the year of the Paris Commune, that Marx and Engels would come to the crucial conclusion that I elaborated earlier; the state must not be seized by the workers, it must be smashed by them. Before we get into this, though, it would be helpful to give a bit of background information on what the Paris Commune was and why it proved so important not only to the development of Marxism, but the development of the whole socialist movement.

The Paris Commune was a short-lived socialist revolution that was brought about by the defeat of France at the hands of the Prussian Empire in 1871. In order to avoid capture by the advancing Prussian army, the French government abandoned the city of Paris and its residents. Rather than lie down and accept defeat, the workers of Paris, aided by the National Guard, which was itself mostly composed of workingmen, seized control of the city and established the Commune.

Immediately, elections were held, and representatives of the various socialist parties and workers’ organizations were thrust into power by the mandate of the people of Paris. They immediately declared the separation of church and state, extended the right to vote to women, established social management of workshops and factories, abolished child labor and night work, and implemented what we would today call rent control. Elected representatives were accountable to their

constituents and liable to be recalled by them at any time, and the task of law enforcement was left to the National Guard, which consisted of the armed people.

In the two months in which the Communards held power, they gutted much of the old state apparatus, replacing it with new institutions that served the needs of the workers directly. They abolished the standing army as an institution separate from the rest of society, and in its place put the National Guard, which drew its numbers directly from the ranks of the working class, and which lived and fought alongside them; the salaries of the officials of the Commune were not to exceed the average salary of a worker, and officials were granted no privileges whatsoever over the rest of the population. Education was to be provided for free to all citizens, and so too would they be ensured stable employment.

These are only a handful of measures instituted by the Commune.

The Paris Commune was virtually the first working-class state. It was a state of a totally different kind, so much so that the word “state” alone might not be sufficient to describe it. From the experience of the Commune, Marx concluded that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.” No, that would not do. The old state machinery must be smashed to pieces, and that is exactly what the Communards did.

The entire working class administered the affairs of the Commune. No working person was excluded from it. It was the monopoly on force exercised by the proletariat against the capitalist class. This is the nature of a “workers’ state,” and any state that is not composed in such a way has no right to call itself working class, no matter how red its flag might be. Due to the nature of a workers’ state as fundamentally different from any other kind of state in history, I think it is appropriate that we modify the phrase. The socialist republic is not just a state; it is a commune-state; it is the state brought down to the level of society, united with it, ceasing to be alienated from it. There is no longer a distinction between the private sphere and the political sphere. The state becomes a weapon wielded by society to strike down those who rule over it.





Workers and National Guardsmen stand among the remains of the demolished Vendôme Column. Photo: Bruno Braquehais, 1871. Public domain.

The commune is the means by which the working class, rifle in hand, suppresses the class of exploiters and modern slave drivers. By abolishing the capitalist class, it abolishes itself as an organ of the working class, for there can be no working class if there is no leisure class. Rather than being the burden of the exploited and the property of the exploiters, productive work becomes the common possession of all human beings. This is what Marx and Engels meant in the Manifesto when they say that public power loses its political character with the abolition of class; that there will be no more use for the apparatuses of violence and coercion, they will no longer be necessary or useful. The various roles of the state become superfluous and cease to exist.

Once the capitalist state has been dismantled by the socialist revolution, the task of building a new society falls to the working class and its party. This task has a dual nature; on the one hand, the revolution must lay the groundwork for a fair, equitable, and prosperous society in which individuals are free to actualize themselves and pursue their goals, and in which this activity harmonizes with the activity of other individuals and contributes to the prosperity of all. On the other hand, it must build structures and systems that deal with the more mundane elements of society, such as delivering mail and making sure that trains and buses run on time and in an orderly fashion.

These two goals, the humane and the practical, are two sides of the same coin; however, it must also be acknowledged that a tension exists between them. In any industrial society, even one that exists in conditions of post-scarcity, there has to be some kind of order; people can't just do "whatever they want." However, people must be allowed broad freedom to act the way they want to, and shouldn't be placed under arbitrary and unfair limitations. Such an allowance for individual

freedom will inevitably lead to some inefficiencies and waste, but this is a small price to pay. I, for one, would rather live in a world where people are free and equal, but where the mail is occasionally a few days late, than in a society where everyone is miserable and forced into conformity for the sake of efficiency and productivity. Besides, it's not like our current government is all too good at maintaining public transport networks and delivering the mail on time.

I'd like to wrap up with an anecdote which very briefly demonstrates what is meant by the term "workers' state", at least when Marx and Engels used it. Karl Marx tended to get into very long and heated conflicts with his fellow socialists; he was a very combative man. One of these people was an anarchist by the name of Mikhail Bakunin, who was one of Marx's lifelong political rivals. On one occasion, Bakunin, in an attempt to criticize Marx's idea of the proletarian government, asked the following sarcastic question: "There are about forty million Germans; are all forty million going to be members of the German government?" To which Marx snapped back, "Certainly, because the whole thing starts with the self-government of the commune" ⁴

It is in this context, and this context only, that the state withering away can be taken seriously. The proletarian commune is, by its nature, nothing more than the entire working class organized against the capitalists. Every worker is a member of the workers' state. Once the battle has been won and there are no more capitalists, there will also cease to be proletarians, for the existence of the working class is predicated on the existence of the capitalist class, and vice versa. With this, the class rule will end forever; the permanent revolution finally comes to an end. The governing principle of the World Socialist Republic will be each according to their ability, each according to their need, and the red flag will take its rightful place as the banner of a free and united human race.

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1. ["Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League"](#), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
 2. [Manifesto of the Communist Party](#), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
 3. *Problems of Everyday Life*, "How to Begin", Leon Trotsky, pg 88-89
 4. ["Conspectus of Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy"](#), Karl Marx

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The Present and Future of Engineers | The Brooklyn Rail

By Nick Chavez

33–42 minutes

I am an engineer. Recently I attended a trade show focused on plastics manufacturing. Like most other attendees, my coworkers and I were in attendance to stay in-the-know on the state of the plastics industry as it specifically relates to the products we engineer for our employer. The convention floor was littered with highly-articulable robotic arms, lumbering injection molders, adaptable inline packagers, cutting-edge SLA printers, lightning-fast bottle fillers, and all other manner of manufacturing robotics whose starry-eyed salespeople wanted nothing more than a slice of our employer's capex budget. Just as numerous were the booths advertising—at varying levels of explicitness—access to cheap manufacturing labor. Boosters of industrial development in certain countries detailed how our manufacturing needs can be met cheaply and effectively by highly-skilled but low-paid workers in Latin America or the Caribbean. Chinese and Taiwanese companies touted manufactured goods at bargain prices with the implication that it is not necessarily the product that is meant to draw your attention, but rather access to inexpensive high-tech labor. North American and European companies assured us that their global networks of plants, be they in Malaysia, Costa Rica, or the American rust belt, could meet our technical, financial, and logistical needs. The diversity of messages had a clear unity: augment your manufacturing bottom line by exercising control over the workforce building your product; hire the most exploitable workers and rationalize their labor via robotics. The common theme across the convention was business models that hinge on the control of laborers and their actions. This is the essence of modern engineering.

Subjecting engineering to Marxist analysis yields complex results. Most engineers are proletarians: we perform labor in exchange for a wage, which we need in order to afford a comfortable life in the global capitalist

system. Despite this, the origins of modern engineering lie just as much in Taylorist factory management as in the sweaty wage labor of the factory floor. In the social totality that is capitalism, we are simultaneously dominated by the imperatives of capital's abstract logic while also concretizing this abstract domination against masses of other workers. This poses a difficult question for communist engineers: whose side are we on? To further complicate matters, communists must also consider not only the role that engineers play in capitalism but what roles they might play in the revolutionary dissolution of capitalism, and in the establishment of a communist society.

These questions are worth considering now, even as *the real movement* for a new society is only just now resuming the historical course from which it was derailed in the course of the previous century. There are limits to what useful conclusions can be gained by stroking one's chin; the actual answers will only be determined by this movement in the course of its action to abolish the present state of things. Within these limits, my aim here is to identify, in broad strokes, the dynamics that shape modern engineering and to use these concepts to speculate as to what the future may hold as it emerges from the chrysalis of the present.

Engineering and the Division of Labor: Productive Activity Today

Capitalist automation is historically unique in its obsession with a generalized reduction in labor time per commodity produced. Labor time per unit is reduced by reducing the complexity of the tasks a worker performs during the manufacturing process. This reduction in task complexity involves a division of labor where each worker performs a smaller set of tasks, each now so simple that they can be performed with little or no risk of production errors. By removing the necessity of complex actions from the worker and placing that responsibility on the significantly more accurate, precise, reliable, and docile machine, the expertise required of the worker is drastically reduced. The CNC lathe, injection molder, and robotic laser welder of today perform the same reduction and simplification (per commodity unit) that the spinning jenny, steam engine, and threshing machine of earlier eras did.

While large numbers of laborers are stripped of the need for advanced technical knowledge (and the bargaining power that accompanies it), it is not as if this expertise disappears. It is simply concentrated in the much smaller proportion of workers who design and configure the machines and processes to create the product. Not only is the expertise

on the specific product concentrated in fewer hands, but new expertise in the design, creation, and maintenance of these machines and processes is required. Further expertise in advancing the scientific principles from which further advancements in productive forces are conjured also becomes more and more imperative. The domain of engineering is this concentration of technical expertise among those who do not use the machines to directly produce goods but do the intellectual labor of developing these machines and processes.

Concentration of technical expertise does not happen simply for its own sake, however. The point of capitalist enterprise is the generation of profit. The work of “rationalizing” the productive process implies that said processes become more rational, but more rational for whom, or by what measure? Rationality is defined here chiefly in terms of money obtained for company shareholders. While it is typically not the responsibility of engineers to manage company finances, the work of engineers involved in commodity production is ultimately in service of the company’s bottom line, either through generating revenue or through eliminating costs. Engineers involved in commodity production accumulate technical expertise while stripping it from ordinary laborers because the concentration of expertise is critical for the perpetual sophistication of the means of production, which itself is crucial for the continued generation of profit. It is precisely at this juncture of the technical with the financial that the wide-reaching social effects of engineers are most apparent.

Engineers involved in the commodity production process can be roughly divided into two categories: those who design and develop the commodity itself, and those who develop and oversee the manufacturing process that brings the commodity to physical fruition and market.

The latter group, whose titles or job descriptions may be something like “Manufacturing Engineer,” “Process Engineer,” or “Industrial Engineer,” are the ones performing work most visibly perpetuating the dynamic of polarizing technical expertise. What these engineers specifically do varies based on the type of commodity being produced, the specific operations and culture of the company in question, and their particular job title. This includes but is not limited to: creating work instructions, developing written standards, performing statistical analysis on time expenditure or material scrappage, selecting and qualifying machinery for usage by laborers, defining processes for the laborer to follow, designing jigs and fixtures to speed up production or improve

repeatability, managing quality control, troubleshooting production problems/stoppages, coordinating with external suppliers, tracking materials, advocating for ease of manufacturability to design engineers, and training laborers. These engineers have a close proximity to the production process itself, and thus are proximal to the juncture where the abstract needs of capital meet the concrete subjugation of the laborer, technician, or operator. Proliferation of mechanization and automation strips expertise and know-how from the laborers as a necessary byproduct of the simplification of their work in the quest for profit. This expertise, now concentrated in the hands of engineers, is deployed by them to ensure that the maximum amount of labor value is extracted from each unit of labor time expended by the worker, which materializes in a maximization of extracted money per unit of labor time. This usually does not appear in this straightforward fashion to the engineers and laborers involved, however, but is generally understood in terms of “reducing waste” (either wasted material or wasted time), “simplifying things,” or otherwise “continuous improvement”/*“kaizen”* as it is known in Lean manufacturing jargon.

Engineers in the other group, who may be called something like “Design Engineer,” “R&D Engineer,” “Product Engineer,” or “Systems Engineer,” play a more subtle yet just as critical role in the maintenance of the technical division of labor. In some industries this group also includes scientists whose expertise is needed for product development. These engineers may not have their hands directly in the productive process, and thus are not directly responsible for carrying out capital’s domination of laborers, technicians, and operators, but they perpetuate that dynamic from a distance in a more abstract fashion.

The specific character of an item produced for sale in a capitalist economy has both a concrete component (its practical utility/application) and an abstract component (its utility to the capitalist: that it can be sold for money). It is easy to view the concrete use of a commodity and its abstract sellability as lying on (qualitative) orthogonal axes that intersect at the item in question, but this abstraction misses the larger picture. In reality the concrete and abstract characters of a commodity are more akin to two strands woven together to form a rope, in which the two fundamental aspects of the commodity form an intertwined whole. A commodity only has abstract value, which is to say, is sellable, because it has a concrete, non-abstract, use. A pair of shoes sells because people can and want to wear them. An item would not be manufactured if the capitalist did not expect it to sell, and commodities only sell if

somebody wants to buy them, which only happens if the commodity serves some purpose or fills a need for the buyer. The fact that an item's utility is crucial to its value at market is obvious, but the determining relationship abstract value has to the concrete utility of a commodity is less so. After all, produced goods were certainly useful prior to the historical generalization of commodity production and the economy-mediating abstract value that accompanied it, so how can abstract value play a determining role in the concrete character of a commodity?

To the capitalist, the most important aspect of a commodity is that it can be sold for money. Unlike the engineer, who is primarily concerned with spending money to turn materials into a commodity, the shareholder of a firm is concerned with using commodities to turn money into a larger sum of money. Profit is not just the consequence of producing a commodity but the reason for producing it in the first place. The owner of capital must deploy said capital in service of generating profit, and thus accumulate more capital, unless they want to be outcompeted by other capitalists. Insofar as capital is invested in the production of commodities, the creation of the commodity must be undertaken in ways amenable to the needs of capital, which is to say, ways that maximize revenue and minimize costs in order to attain the largest profit margin. The needs of capital are inscribed all over commodities, whether they are consumer goods or products sold from one layer of industry to another. Some common and visible examples of this include planned obsolescence in consumer electronics, the use of inferior (cheaper) materials, and incompatibilities between functionally similar commodities due to proprietary differences. The dynamic is deeper than this, though. All commodities that are manufactured must first be designed, and commodities must be designed with the manufacturing process in mind. A good design engineer is familiar with the processes required for their design to be manufactured and can thus minimize the amount of money spent on manufacturing costs without compromising the usefulness of the product. A machined part requiring fewer setups on a milling machine, a plastic component shaped so that a maximal quantity can be made from a single injection mold, and an electrical assembly designed to take advantage of automated component placement all require the design engineer to understand the manufacturing process to a sufficient level to take maximum advantage of the rationalized production processes developed by manufacturing, industrial, and process engineers.

A Taste of Our Own Medicine

To be an engineer in commodity production is to play a dual role in capitalism. The deployment of science and technology to streamline industrial work is unambiguously tied to lowered wages, decreased workplace autonomy, workplace boredom and tedium, and an overall reduction in quality of life for huge numbers of workers. In this sense, engineers are allied with management, and abstractly aligned with capital as a social force. Engineers, however, are also workers. We work in exchange for money, which we seek in order to meet the same needs everybody else has. Since our work is ultimately in service to profit, we are not immune to the rationalizing dynamics we inflict on other workers. Engineering labor is divided into different disciplines and gradations, with the result that one is often assigned work that is repetitive, dull, and structured outside the control of the engineer performing it. This is in addition to the low-grade social violence inherent in work, such as mandatory overtime (often without additional pay), stagnating wages, layoffs, frustrating commutes, invasive time-tracking, abusive bosses, and incompetent or hostile HR personnel.

The rationalization of engineering work is undeniably driven by capital's profit-seeking logic. This logic, not only in engineering but in other aspects of society as well, often undermines itself by cultivating emergent phenomena that can undo the social structures that spawned them in the first place. It is exceedingly common for engineers of all kinds to feel that their work is hampered by the organizational structure or dynamics of the company they work for, especially in larger companies where there is a stricter division of engineering labor and labor in general.

A rigid division between engineering duties (e.g. electrical design vs. mechanical design, or process engineering vs. quality control engineering) ensures that engineering time is spent in ways that management has strong control over, which is necessary for the completion of large projects involving many people. This division of labor, however, simultaneously undermines a corporation's ability to extract the highest quality labor from its engineers. It is very rare for an engineer to need only to understand a small area of knowledge to do their job properly. The overwhelming majority of engineers strongly benefit from familiarity with the other engineering duties involved in the production of a commodity, especially those adjacent to theirs in the production process. A research engineer/scientist must have a sufficient understanding of the practical needs of the field in order to ensure that

their research and findings are useful and applicable. A design engineer must understand enough about the manufacturing processes and application of their design to ensure that it is cost efficient to manufacture and can be utilized as intended. Likewise, the manufacturing engineer and the applications engineer cannot do their jobs properly if they do not understand the design intent of the commodity they work with. A manufacturing engineer must ensure that the fabrication they oversee is capable of yielding commodities that work as intended, and the applications engineer cannot best develop a product application for the customer if they do not have a full understanding of the capabilities and limits of the design. The best way for these engineers to understand the pertinent details of each other's work is to be directly involved with each other's work, so that they can develop a strong intuitive understanding of it. This poses a problem for management: allowing engineers too much freedom and autonomy makes it difficult to control the character and timeline of what is produced, but chaining everybody to their cubicle and requiring all communication to pass through management will quickly kill both the effectiveness and morale of engineers. A good manager is capable of balancing this tension; however, the division of labor makes it difficult for engineers to interact meaningfully with other departments, especially at larger companies.

Herein lies the key to engineering's dysfunction under capitalism: capital is simultaneously the driving factor behind engineering work and the primary obstruction to doing that work well.

Engineers and Ideology

In 2021 virtually nobody lives outside of the influence of capitalism. Even those whose labor is not fully integrated into capital's rationality must still live in a world dominated by capitalist markets. After hundreds of years of capital terraforming the social landscape of human experience generally, and work in particular, it should be uncontroversial to suggest that capitalism is at the very core of engineering ideology, except that there is no such thing as a single "engineering ideology," as the "engineering experience" is incredibly vast and diverse. While the tendencies described in this section are an outgrowth of global production dynamics, the details are more specific to engineering in highly-developed industrial economies, with which I am personally more familiar.

For all the diversity in subjectivity of individual engineers, the actual

work performed by modern engineers is inextricable from the logic of capital. Despite lofty rhetoric from Silicon Valley grifters, engineers don't do what we do to bring about positive change or to save the world or any other naive platitudes, even if the engineer in question earnestly believes they are doing so. As demonstrated earlier, engineering is mostly an elaborate social machine that commands vast amounts of people, intellect, labor, and power to serve the accumulation of profit through the creation and sale of commodities. Engineers cannot shape the world through the power of good ideas and clever engineering; we shape the world according to the needs of capital. Even engineers working at non-profits or independently in their garages cannot operate without money, and even then must operate in a world shaped around capitalism.

This centrality of capital to engineering is critical for understanding what shapes the ideology of any particular engineer. The privileged position that engineers hold with respect to a large portion of the workforce often manifests itself in a technocratic elitism among engineers. The division of technical labor between "skilled" and "unskilled" both creates and justifies the notion that engineers are intellectually superior to other groups of laborers. This polarization of expertise is not an iron law, but rather a tendency. Operators, line workers, and technicians most certainly accumulate expertise and know-how in the hands-on process of commodity manufacturing. Engineers who are good at their jobs learn to respect and consult the expertise that develops at the point of production, as it makes the rationalization of "unskilled" work easier if the engineer understands precisely what they are rationalizing. The macro-societal effects of this rationalization process are pretty opaque to those actively participating in it. Instead, this takes the appearance of improving efficiency, reducing error, eliminating waste, and saving money. Overt hostility to the "unskilled" laborers whose work is being rationalized by engineers is typically frowned upon, but the implication behind all these otherwise positive-sounding descriptors (efficiency is good, right?) is that "unskilled" laborers are an undesired part of the manufacturing process, and any success in reducing their numbers or their agency is a success for the engineer and for the company.

Counterintuitively, it is not uncommon for the engineers most responsible for the rationalization of other workers' labor to be the most personally friendly with manufacturing staff who occupy "lower" positions in the manufacturing hierarchy. These engineers, typically manufacturing engineers or process engineers, do best when they have

a close understanding of the manufacturing process and the human-level activity that comprises it. Many engineers in this position themselves have performed such work either as part of their training or as part of their work duties prior to working as an engineer. Even if these engineers have never occupied the positions held by the workers whose labor they must rationalize, simple proximity to these workers during operating hours can often create a sense of camaraderie, as the manufacturing and operations departments are often pitted against other departments in a way that resembles a bizarre departmental nationalism where antagonisms between “classes” (laborer vs. engineer) are suppressed in the name of antagonism between “nations” (departments). This is obviously a very crude analogy but what inconveniences manufacturing laborers (material shortages, accelerated timelines, unexpected changes, quality control issues) also tends to inconvenience the engineers responsible for rationalizing their labor. This particular unity between manufacturing laborers and associated engineers can often be just as influential on an engineer's individual ideological schemas as the inherently antagonistic rationalization process.

Engineers are not solely conduits through which capital dominates factory line workers. Our own status as wage laborers comes with plenty of subjectivity-building characteristics in the face of capital. Work culture varies drastically based on locale, industry, and even individual place of employment. For many engineers paid a salary rather than an hourly wage there is no legal protection against their employer demanding more hours of work than the standard work week with no extra compensation. The division of labor among engineers often creates incredibly boring work situations where very little of an engineer's talent is put to use. Engineers often find our ability to perform good work hampered by departmental boundaries, company bureaucracy, lack of cross-functional expertise, and other phenomena rooted in capitalist division of labor. While engineers tend to be quite well compensated for our work, compared to most other professions, many companies refuse to keep engineer salaries competitive after several years of employment. Some industries undergo cycles of boom and bust that involve laying off large quantities of engineers with little warning. The criticality of engineers to commodity production means that engineers as a group will almost assuredly never face the levels of abjection to which most of the rest of the proletariat is subjected. Despite this, engineers are still capable of experiencing the antagonism between our position as workers and the position of our bosses as

agents of capital.

The ideological facets of engineering work are similar to capital itself in that both are abstract systems of self-perpetuating logic that perpetuate themselves and also undermine themselves by the same mechanisms.

The way our work fits into the needs of capital is what keeps us employed but can often make that employment miserable.

The application of scientific knowledge to the modification of our world is the heart of engineering labor. This type of work often demands creativity, intellectual curiosity, technical affinity, independent thinking, and passion. Creativity and initiative that directly help the company bottom line are typically encouraged. A sense of curiosity and autodidacticism are not only helpful to engineers but often requisites, as the assimilation of unfamiliar and technically challenging concepts and skill sets is frequently necessary in the workplace. Engineering work often forges a can-do mentality where any problem can be solved with a methodical approach, the application of scientific principles, and the ability to learn the relevant information. Though these attitudes are typically considered desirable, they are the flip side of other common engineering behaviors that are typically met with disdain by others.

Many engineers believe that their ability to approach technical problems methodically at work is easily transferred to other areas where they lack expertise. While it is true that a methodical approach and broad scope of technical knowledge is frequently useful outside the workplace, this attitude often veers into rank scientism. A tendency to collapse complex problems into quantifiable variables manipulable by mathematical or scientific approaches very easily destroys the important nuance that makes such problems so difficult to solve in the first place. This is most apparent with large-scale societal problems wherein it is not uncommon for engineers, with their absolute lack of expertise on the relevant matters, to propose solutions that treat social systems as made up of isolatable and independently manipulable parts, reducing the factors involved to a level of simplicity no longer adequate to solving the problem at hand. The ability and authority to solve technical problems often breeds an arrogance where those without engineering or scientific training are not considered to be as intelligent or capable as those with such training. In university engineering programs it is not uncommon for non-STEM majors to be the objects of mocking jokes, and in the workplace this attitude can take aim at non-engineering departments. These are all stereotypes of engineers, of course, and it would be absurd to think they apply to every engineer, but stereotypes generally

don't arise from nowhere.

Fundamentally an individual engineer's mind is just as likely as that of any other individual to be ideologically unpredictable and idiosyncratic. Within the subjectivity of one who is both an agent and object of capital, there exists plenty of room for sympathy to communism. For the engineers who desire to apply their technical expertise for the legitimate betterment of the human species, their only recourse is the decoupling of capital and engineering, which is to say their only recourse is the establishment of communism.

Engineers and Communism

The relationship between engineers and communism can be analyzed in terms of two distinct but related categories: the role of engineers in the revolutionary destruction of capitalism, and their role once communism is established. Given that an organized revolutionary movement willing and able to dismantle capitalism does not yet exist, much of this is speculation. My goal here is not to try to predict the future but to illuminate possible trajectories for dynamics that exist today so that they can be conceptually digested ahead of time, at least rudimentarily.

As I said, there is no single engineering subjectivity, hence no direct link between engineering and a possible revolutionary consciousness. What can be said with near certainty is that a revolution that does not have substantial participation from engineers is doomed to fail at implementing communism. The material basis for communism is not proletarian rage or mass-scale dispossession, it is centuries of labor now embodied in the form of fixed capital: machinery, buildings, global productive infrastructure, and countless commodities. There is a cruel irony to the fact that communism has been made possible by the brutal subjugation of the majority of the planet's population into wage labor, but it is indeed mass manufacturing and global distributive capacity that makes a planned social system, controllable by the collective human desire for wellbeing, possible. Capitalism has created the technical means for a society based on the rational safeguarding and expansion of human welfare, but not necessarily the social forms that are conducive to such a society. Engineering, as it currently exists, represents the overwhelming bulk of the technical knowledge existing within capitalism, but is socially composed in a way that would necessarily be dissolved by the establishment of communism.

The past two decades have seen a rebirth of mass politics brought on by decreasing proletarian access to the means of subsistence. These struggles signal the start of a new phase in proletarian activity qualitatively different from the mass worker mobilizations of the 19th and 20th centuries. Unlike many of these older struggles, the mass mobilizations of today tend to take place outside of the workplace and, insofar as they have demands or specific complaints, are focused largely on a lack of the means of subsistence rather than on workplace issues or other matters relating directly to capitalist productive activity. The reasons for this lie outside the scope of this essay; however, a significant causal factor is the simple fact that a far smaller proportion of the global proletarian population is today employed directly in the commodity production process. This is why much contemporary communist theory focuses on the role of surplus population (the growing number of people superfluous to commodity production) in today's struggles and uprisings; this is now the defining dynamic of proletarian self-activity. The problematic aspect of this dynamic is that these movements cannot build towards communism without the involvement of workers with the technical know-how of commodity production and the willingness to deploy that know-how towards communist ends.

In the US, where I live, there is very little in the way of self-organization among engineers. There have been noteworthy unionization drives among software development employees (including those with Software Engineer titles) in recent years, including those at Alphabet (Google), *The New York Times*, and *NPR*. Despite many of the participants holding titles containing the word “engineer,” software engineering and development tend to be very different from the types of engineering described in this essay. Software engineers play both the role of rationalizing technical expert and that of hands-on craftsman wielding particular knowledge of the work medium (code). A software engineer, despite the title and generally heftier salary, is more akin to a very skilled and creative technician than to an engineer whose job it is to command, directly or indirectly, “low-skilled” labor. Attempts to introduce the traditional technical division of labor into the software realm are simply not very effective, as software is a much more abstracted practice than most other forms of engineering. Engineering utilizes abstract concepts to manipulate concrete phenomena that fundamentally require human labor time. A 3D CAD model of a machine component is abstract, but the human labor needed to fabricate the component is concrete. A circuit schematic is very abstract but ultimately useless if it is not manufactured into an actual circuit board by

a person operating a machine. The process specification for a manufacturing cell exists only so that the cell succeeds in manufacturing concrete goods, otherwise the specification is useless. In contrast, software, with its cascading layers of languages, compilers, and assemblers, is much more abstract. While software controls the very physical phenomenon of electrons racing around computer components, these concrete processes are not dependent on human labor time to function. Sure, someone had to manufacture the CPU and the motherboard and the memory, but this labor was controlled by mechanical, electrical, and manufacturing engineers. Software tends to control that which is inhuman; it is a tool that can be used to automate its own development processes. Where it cannot automate its own development, there is nobody left qualified to perform these un-automatable tasks except for the software engineers/developers themselves, as the expertise required is often too high to pass the work off to anyone with less of an understanding. This is not to say that attempts at rationalization do not occur. They are simply far less effective than those that have historically occurred in manufacturing.

Not all software exists in the abstract, however. Software embedded in machines, or software used to manage the labor of others, certainly functions similarly to the type of engineering abstractions used to entrench division of labor in other engineering disciplines. Machine-user interfaces, warehouse sorting algorithms, and ride-sharing apps are examples of software development that absolutely uses abstractions to enforce a technical division of labor in line with older engineering disciplines. This type of software engineering is different from the work of the software developers who are beginning to organize in their workplaces.

Anecdotally, I can identify a rift in culture between older engineers and younger ones. Dissatisfaction with working conditions and compensation seem to be more prevalent among engineers earlier on in their careers. Pensions are now exceedingly rare, where they used to be commonplace. Salaries, while still higher than those of many other “professionals”, are often stagnant or even shrinking relative to cost of living. It is an open secret that the only way to secure a significant raise is to leave a company after a year or two for another one that will pay more, a process that one must repeat in order to secure a salary capable of the mythological “middle class lifestyle” an engineer in older times could have had for his (it was almost always a man) family as a single earner. A growing proportion of female engineers often finds

themselves butting heads with the sexism one can easily imagine entrenched in a historically male-dominated work culture. An increasingly hostile housing market and a determination on the part of employers to keep wages stagnant is making it a lot easier for younger engineers (younger workers of all kinds, really) to see the antagonism between themselves and the shareholders, even if the actual work they perform is squarely in the corner of big-C Capital.

Putting aside the question of how engineers will partake in the revolutionary dismantling of capitalism, there exists the question of what engineers will do afterwards. This is obviously highly dependent on the specifics of the world that the revolution inherits, and cannot reasonably be predicted here. Nonetheless, it is likely that the technical division of labor will dissolve itself. The separation of expertise from practice is only “rational” by the logic of capital. Given how hampering this division becomes when it becomes increasingly granular, the dissolution of capital would necessarily dissolve any incentive to divide technical expertise so severely. Automation, liberated from simply being a tool for capital, can be deployed to eliminate drudgery rather than to engender it in the manufacturing process. The destruction of many useless industries, from armaments production to health insurance, would mean severely less hands-on dirty work, and the opening up of learning resources to anybody who desires access would surely kill the distinction between engineer and laborer. Those who *do* will have the freedom to think, and those who *think* will be empowered to do. This will improve the lives of engineers as much as everyone else’s.

Nick Chavez is a mechanical engineer in the United States. He currently works in engineering R&D.