



Workers Commonwealths

**Islands of Liberation from Capitalism,
Militarism and Nationalism**

Steven Schofield

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steveschofield@phonecoop.coop

www.lessnet.co.uk

Introduction

Capitalism, militarism and nationalism have turned the human race into a contagion that threatens all life on the planet. The state of the world is so abject that there is no alternative other than to sweep away the whole bankrupt edifice before it sweeps us away. But time is running out. We are in the terminal phase of a perverse industrial and technological system that exploits working people, exhausts non-renewable resources and destroys the environment, for one purpose and one purpose only, to feed the material excesses of parasitic, capitalist elites on a scale that would have made the pharaohs blush.

Previous historical experience provides little preparation for what is in store. The traditional economic cycle of boom and bust, of crisis and recovery, no longer applies. Growth in output can only hit the buffers of resource depletion. Prices of oil, gas and scarce raw materials will continue to rise, with crippling effects on overall demand. Any productivity improvements and energy efficiency gains from technological innovations will be subsumed under the burden of increased resource extraction costs.

As the crisis deepens, the fundamental nature of antagonistic class interests at the heart of the capitalist system will be increasingly exposed, with authoritarian political controls at home to crush protest movements, military power projection abroad to secure non-renewable resources, and an ever-widening chasm between the incomes and lifestyles of the elites and ordinary working people.

All this and more will be legitimised by Western leaders as the necessary price to pay for the restoration of prosperity, the preservation of democracy and the protection of national security. But these last, desperate efforts can no longer disguise the architecture of oppression, nor the endemic failures of a capitalism that is beyond practical repair and ideological manipulation. Far from providing

the framework for recovery, the best that can be expected is austerity with low growth - a stay of execution as the noose tightens and we enter the perfect storm of irreversible environmental catastrophe and global resource wars.

Section One

Capitalism : From the delusional to the pathological phase

Capitalism has a simple, inexorable and terrifying logic. Everything on land and sea must be commodified. The rate of resource depletion constantly accelerates and the geographical boundaries constantly expand until the last drop is used up. Despite the overwhelming evidence that non-renewable resources are reaching peaks of production, and that the continued release of carbon dioxide and other gases into the atmosphere is leading to irreversible climate change, there is no concern for the preservation of habitats, nor for ecological diversity. The natural world is simply a cornucopia that will continue to release profits ad infinitum. When one source is exhausted, others will be found to take its place.

But the low-hanging fruit has already disappeared. The oil fields of the Persian Gulf provide the most graphic representation of depletionism; a vast reservoir of perfectly formed liquid energy, accumulated over millions of years, and exhausted within two generations. Capitalism's 'golden age', based on high growth rates and relatively full employment, was a fools paradise that paraded a temporary, cheap energy glut as a transcendental liberation of the human race through material wealth, made possible only by the genius of free enterprise.

The new era of peak oil has exposed the reality behind this deception. A steady decline in the capacity of traditional sources is leading to the exploitation of other, less accessible, energy supplies using expensive extraction techniques both on land and through deep-sea drilling. Inevitably, there will be higher costs, increased carbon emissions, and ever-more frantic efforts at exotic technological fixes like carbon capture to preserve the illusion of growth and material progress.

Capitalism is now moving from the delusional to the pathological phase. In the delusional

phase, when Western industrialised societies experienced steady growth rates of 2-3% annually, working people could look to increases in wages and high employment levels, underpinned by the safety-net of a welfare state that included access to health care and pensions. These accommodations helped legitimise capitalism, even as the wealth gap between rich and poor became a yawning chasm.

Pathological capitalism will see the total breakdown of the social democratic contract. Ever greater sacrifices will be demanded of working people, while the very trends of resource exploitation and its attendant financial speculation that lie at the heart of the crisis, will deepen and accelerate. Blame for failure will be laid on those who do not adapt to the market principles of reduced real wages and the dismantling of welfare provision, in the face of international competition, rather than to the capitalist system itself.

The global crisis of 2008-09 was the first major event of the pathological phase, as some of the largest US financial institutions were left effectively bankrupt after an orgy of speculation. Governments desperately intervened to maintain their banking systems and to stave off a global depression. As a result, they accumulated massive sovereign debts and were put under intense pressure, from the very same financial institutions responsible for the crisis, to cut back severely on public expenditure.

Specific factors such as exposure to sub-prime loans in the United States played a significant role. Nor should systemic criminal behaviour be discounted, where senior executives passed off worthless funds as safe investments. But the focus on purely financial elements to the crisis masks the underlying dynamics in the real-world economy. Over the preceding twelve months there had been a substantial increase in oil prices, caused by high international demand and concerns over future supplies. Reduced spending power affected orders in key sectors like the car industry and undermined

confidence in growth projections. Investments were called in and funds withdrawn resulting, ultimately, in the financial meltdown and, despite government intervention, the global recession,

It is deceptively easy to constitute financial capitalism as free floating above the world of production, especially given the byzantine complexity of instruments like credit default swaps (CDS) that seem to take on a momentum all of their own. But the trillions of electronic transactions carried out in the global financial markets on a daily basis are, however indirectly it may seem, connected to the real world of transnational corporations and their domination of resource extraction and manufacturing production.

Financial speculation flows from the accumulated value of those corporations and their ability to project profits through planned investments, in turn creating speculative, futures markets on commodities' pricing. Various reforms such as the separation of retail (safe) from investment (risky) banking can never resolve the underlying imperative to maximise profits in a depletionist and pathological capitalist economy characterised by volatile price fluctuations and crises of production.

The prospects for a return to the sustained growth and redistributive welfarism of a mythical golden age are non-existent. Rather, capitalism red in tooth and claw, run by transnational corporations and enforced by Western governments, will be the order of the day.

Conclusion

There are two elements to the depletionist crisis. One is the overarching structure of capitalism as a remorseless, environmental-destruction machine, and the other is the threat to the living standards and rights of working people. Like a slow-motion equivalent of the asteroid that smashed into the planet sixty-five million years ago, capitalism will lead to mass extinctions and environmental collapse by the end of the

century. In the meantime, all the provisions of a modern, social-democratic state will be dismantled as authoritarian rule is tightened at home and resource wars are waged abroad to protect the wealth of elites.

Every destructive economic and environmental trend is accelerating, driven by the monopoly power of giant, transnational corporations. The struggle for real democracy in the advanced, industrial societies is also the responsibility we have to preserve the biosphere and to begin the historically unprecedented task of global, environmental recovery. The only way to achieve both goals is through the abolition of capitalism.

Militarism – Defending Capitalism Through Permanent War

Militarism is the Frankenstein monster to capitalism's mad scientific genius. Ever since the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and North Africa, economic exploitation through military conquest has been a consistent theme of human history, including the tribute of precious metals paid in return for 'protection' and the flow of food and raw materials to the imperial power-centre.

Western industrial society was constructed from the competing imperial ambitions of the old, European feudal powers, characterised by slavery and direct rule that eventually extended to the exploitation of whole continents. Imperial wars that would have been familiar to the Romans were fought by leading powers into the 20th Century, but on a truly global scale, as the United States emerged to rival and, ultimately, surpass the old European colonists. The First World War brought together a toxic mix of imperialist nationalism with the techniques of industrialised mass slaughter, as the major powers vied for supremacy.

By the mid 1930s, intensifying imperial ambitions led to a second world war even more destructive than the first. Germany and Japan may have been extreme examples of societies dominated by ideas of racial supremacy and imperial conquest, but their

original economic objectives during the build-up to war were hardly dissimilar to those of Western imperialism. Nazi Germany intended to make Eastern Europe a giant slave colony supplying food and raw materials, while Japanese militarists viewed East Asia as their rightful area for imperial control and one usurped by Western powers.

The Pacific War effectively began before the European, as the Roosevelt administration carried out an economic blockade to starve Japan of raw materials and energy supplies, particularly oil. The objective was to maintain Western dominance of East Asia and to ensure access to the vast potential markets and resources of China, threatened by the Japanese invasion and occupation of Manchuria.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was the response of a weaker imperial power that had been subject to sustained economic blockade and desperate to gain some strategic advantage at the outset of a conflict that was now seen as inevitable by both sides. In the new era of total warfare and long-range, industrialised bombing raids against cities, Japan's strategy proved catastrophic; culminating in the immolation of Tokyo, the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the worst civilian casualty tolls ever experienced in war time.

The end of the Second World War left the United States in a position of unprecedented imperial domination. Despite the emergence of the Soviet Union as a serious ideological threat, compounded by the loss of China to communist control in 1948, the framework for a post-war capitalist system was put in place with ruthless determination. Nowhere was this more evident than in Europe, where the United States deliberately reneged on the commitment to create a unified, neutral and demilitarised Germany in order to consolidate political control of Western Europe.

The incorporation of a re-armed West Germany into Nato made the establishment of a Soviet buffer-zone inevitable. Communist-controlled governments in

Eastern Europe were the first line of defence against what the Soviet Union considered to be the very real threat of another terrible land invasion. Inexorably, central Europe became the epicentre of an escalating conventional and nuclear arms race.

The Cold War was the intersection of imperial and ideological power struggles. Genuine popular revolutions against imperialism, as in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s, could be demonised by the United States as a communist threat and as part of a global communist conspiracy that required full-scale invasion and conventional warfare against its people, leading to the deaths of millions. In other cases, where nationalist leaders called for the control and ownership of resources, such as the Mossadegh government in Iran during the early 1950s, they could be covertly undermined and replaced by pro-Western elites who brutally suppressed popular opposition. Arms sales were used to promote alliances and to prop up some of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, as long as they complied with demands for continued access to oil supplies.

As a result, the United States developed an unprecedented, global military presence, with over a thousand foreign military bases complemented by aircraft-carrier battle groups to patrol every strategically important sea route. Superpower confrontation may have led to an arms race and to the insane logic of nuclear deterrence, where the destruction of the entire planet could be contemplated as the necessary price to pay for security. But stripping away these ideological elements, nothing could disguise the overwhelming military supremacy of the United States, its unrivalled global power projection and its ability, with regional partners like the UK, to enforce the imperial framework for resource exploitation.

Over the post-war decades an extraordinary industrial and technological system has been constructed for permanent war preparation. The United States and its junior partners have developed a vast Military-Industrial-Intelligence-Complex (MIIC), with the

capacity to produce a full range of advanced weapons systems, supported by a global intelligence, surveillance and communications network. This MIIC dominates government spending through giant, specialised arms corporations receiving multi-billion dollar contracts for both procurement and research and development.

Its influence pervades all forms of public life through a seamless elite network of leading politicians and senior armed forces personnel who move effortlessly between public office and the boardrooms of these major corporations. The interests of the MIIC have become indivisible from the interests of the state, as the dynamic to generate monopoly profits from each new generation of weapons is translated by successive governments into a series of national security priorities.

The only serious challenge to militarism came, ironically, from the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. Although it did not have the resources to compete militarily on the same scale as the United States, there is no doubt that the siege economy and control of satellite countries could have been maintained for many more years. Instead, the Gorbachev leadership repudiated superpower confrontation in favour of the elimination of nuclear weapons, deep cuts to conventional forces and the removal of all foreign military bases. For the first time in modern history, a leading power put forward a serious programme for rapid and comprehensive disarmament, and a new security framework to transfer resources wasted on military spending and redirect them to the pressing challenges of climate change and world poverty.

Luckily for Western militarists, the collapse of the Soviet Union provided a convenient escape route from the threat of global peace and common security. Despite some modest cuts to military spending during the mid 1990s, the overall capacity for power projection was enhanced to support imperialist objectives. A heady combination of western triumphalism and the United States' seemingly unassailable military

leadership offered the prospects for what was called, without irony, a 'new world order' of liberal democracies; essentially the extension of capitalism to former communist countries and the legitimisation of any United States' military intervention.

The post-Cold War era could more accurately be described as the era of depletionist imperialism. The United States has already conducted two major land wars in the Persian Gulf to preserve access to oil in Iraq and to supply routes through Afghanistan, while extending its influence into the Horn of Africa because of recent oil and gas discoveries. As well as invasions to protect strategic interests, the United States has enhanced clandestine intervention capabilities. Special operations forces and remote control weapons like drones are being used in a growing number of countries to achieve similar objectives but without the inconvenience of a formal declaration of war.

In strategic terms, only China has emerged to pose any real threat to this long period of United States' supremacy. Its rapid expansion of resource-intensive manufacturing necessitated the development of a global supply base for raw materials and energy, including the construction of processing plants in South America and Africa, as well as oil production facilities in the Persian Gulf. Competition between the major states for increasingly scarce resources is inevitable. China's capacity for military power projection remains small in comparison to the United States but regional tensions are growing, as over disputed rights to oil exploration in the South China sea.

Imperialism, in the depletionist era, is being stripped of any ideological pretensions and stands exposed for what it has always been, the attempt by major states to carve up what is left of the world's diminishing supply of non-renewable resources in favour of their own corporate and political elites.

Conclusion

The United States and its allies now preside

over the most extensive, imperial resource-control system ever devised. By any normal standards, this trillion dollar arms budget would be seen as extraordinary wasteful, especially when set against the overwhelming issues of global poverty and environmental degradation that are the pressing security challenges of the 21st Century. Not only is this a massive diversion of public funds from socially-useful activities like investment in housing and infrastructure, it also represents a substantial element of the historical, government debt burden.

But a ragbag collection of 'rogue states' and terrorists serves the purpose of legitimising this permanent diversion of resources into the MIIC, while disguising the true nature of the imperial objectives of the United States and its allies. The whole government structure has become subservient to this overarching militarism, where the interests of the MIIC and the state are seen as indivisible.

As well as conventional power projection, new forms of warfare are being developed. Through advances in satellite imagery and electronic communications interception, the MIIC now offers the tantalising prospect of being able to instantly eliminate anyone, anywhere in the world, using a combination of remote-control weapons and special forces.

The legacy from continued imperialist military intervention, in terms of deaths and injuries, compounded by the destruction of basic infrastructure, is truly appalling and has resulted in widespread anti-Western sentiments. The term 'blowback' is used to describe how counter-productive such interventions have been, with attacks by opposition groups against occupying forces, and retaliatory bombing campaigns on civilian targets, sometimes in Western countries.

Far from being counter-productive, these interventions have created forms of dependency that directly serves imperial objectives. Reconstruction funding is offered on the proviso that the country leaves itself completely open to the operations of the free

market, which in reality means to domination by transnational corporations. Contracts for oil and other forms of energy production are made available to Western corporations, rather than through the development of indigenous industries. Military equipment is usually added to the aid packages, further consolidating dependency on Western technology, while providing another lucrative source of funding for arms companies.

Also, the undercurrent of perceived threat against the West is used by the MIIC to reinforce the climate of fear necessary to legitimise the national security state and its continued privileged access to public funding. The pervasive influence of the MIIC now extends to applying the same repressive technologies used abroad for a domestic surveillance system. Ordinary citizens carrying out their democratic right to political protest and dissent are being reclassified as subversives and potential terrorists, and their legal rights to free speech and assembly are being eroded and, ultimately, dismantled.

When Western governments face the most serious public debt crisis in post-war history, and savage cuts are being made to vital services, including health, education, welfare and infrastructure provision, it is the arms budget that remains sacrosanct. The future is one of permanent war preparation abroad and authoritarian control at home - an Orwellian, imperialist dystopia constructed in the name of national security.

Nationalism and the politics of pathological capitalism

Nationalism provides the political superstructure for the accumulation of power and resources by capitalist elites. The nation state is a form of punishment levied on working people to promote the interests of capital at the expense of basic needs. Organised plunder and resource control is extended through international organisations like the United Nations and the European

Union, as well as international treaties and conventions, all rigorously enforcing market disciplines and the interests of transnational corporations.

Larger western states, the bedrock of capitalism, are a recent construct cobbled together through rather messy and often disputed arrangements of geography, language and culture. In return for collective public goods, security being the most obvious, states were ceded the monopoly of violence and the right to raise taxes. But they have also been the subject of serious internal opposition and separatist tensions. The history of these larger states is one of contested legitimacy, pressure for greater regional autonomy and the struggle for independence.

The zenith of this system corresponded to the particular demands of capitalist modernisation and imperialism during a period of uneven development. Britain's emergence as the first industrial power precipitated other state formation, notably Germany, with its coordinated programme of state education and emphasis on technical and manufacturing skills. Security in the modern, industrial age of competing states could only be guaranteed, according to nation builders, by the capacity to wage war, a large population and a strong manufacturing base. National identity became a toxic mix of rapid industrialisation, imperial ambitions and total warfare, with millions sacrificed in the bloody carnage of World War One.

Mass popular movements also emerged in these states, usually through trade unions advocating working-class political representation in rapidly expanding cities. For radical groups of communists, socialists, anarchists and syndicalists, industrial modernity represented the real and immediate prospect of replacing capitalism with a truly democratic and universal system of common ownership. The economy required revolutionary transformation, transcending nationalism to encompass the collective interests of all working people on the basis of social need rather than private profit. But when working-class agitation was translated

into electoral success and parliamentary government, radical demands were effectively marginalised.

A classic social-democratic compromise evolved in all the major states, focused on political and trade union rights, welfare provision and investment in social housing to ameliorate poverty. The capitalist economic framework was left essentially intact. A highly-charged nationalism was cynically manipulated by capitalist elites to invoke a sense of shared benefit, and where necessary, shared duty and sacrifice. Strikes and other forms of direct action to defend the interests of working people were portrayed as damaging to the national interest, undermining the prospects for exports in the highly competitive international markets on which overall prosperity rested. In extreme cases, such as a general strike, the army was mobilised and a national emergency declared.

The greatest crisis facing capitalism in the modern era, and the one that raised serious questions as to its future legitimacy and even survival, was the Great Depression of the early 1930s, when demand collapsed and virtually all the industrialised economies experienced mass unemployment. Here, government expenditure was used as a form of demand stimulation, helping to break the cycle of deflation. But the Keynesian revolution, as it became known, was anything but revolutionary.

Keynes, himself, was at pains to stress that this approach was not intended to challenge the fundamentals of the capitalist system. Spending by the state was a temporary mechanism to stimulate activity and return the economy to the optimum level of production and full employment. Despite the programmes of nationalisation carried out by social democratic governments after the war, there was never any sustained attempt to develop an alternative model of workers control and ownership.

Instead, the state's role became one of overt and covert subsidies to large corporations. These included direct intervention such as

R&D support, regional funding to attract new industries following the loss of traditional manufacturing, export credit guarantees and favourable tax regimes. For some sectors, such as nuclear power, these subsidies could run into billions of pounds and last for decades, with no commercial application. Similarly, transnational corporations often took advantage of regional funding before relocating to countries offering more attractive concessions.

The national-interest consensus that was constructed after the Second World War was used to promote a particular type of economic development through large-scale, industrial and technological systems. Political leaders emphasised the existence of so-called national champions, some of which were state-owned, as prominent companies with a domestic base. But support was, essentially, directed to the transnational corporations that dominate the global economy and which manipulated such national symbolism to extend their interests.

For generations, radicals who challenged this nationalist consensus and promoted workers control, faced the perennial dilemma that they either participated in mainstream politics or risked marginalisation. Social democratic parties offered the prospect of electoral success, even though their leaders, when given strong electoral mandate for change, all too often settled for modest reform programmes. The hope was that, over time, an ongoing process of political education and extra-parliamentary agitation, married to competency in delivering a range of progressive economic and social programmes, would strengthen support for a truly radical economic agenda.

But the potential for a gradualist politics of change has been shattered by a series of capitalist crises. Rather than the strengthening of working-class representation, the leaderships of social democratic parties have generally responded by embracing the ideological demands and arguments for privatisation and cutbacks in the welfare state, while distancing themselves from trade unions and other workers organisations. This

defeatism was evident long before the recession of 2008-09, with a new mainstream political consensus that Keynesian policies were inflationary rather than reflationary, public services were bureaucratic and inefficient, and workers rights were a burden on industry that undermined profitability.

What the sovereign debt crisis has done is to provide a defining symbol for the death of social democracy as a vehicle for any semblance of radical economic policies. Instead, it now represents a concerted ideological assault on the public sector and the welfare state. Far from being a failure of capitalism, the new national consensus is that debt is the result of profligate governments unable to control public expenditure. The origins of the crisis and the need for massive government intervention to bail out a discredited financial system are essentially ignored. Instead, there is simply a shared, national obligation for austerity as the only means of reducing the debt. Criminal financiers are rewarded for their orgy of speculation, while working people are punished for being innocent bystanders.

The economic debate, such as it is within this nationalist, ideological consensus, is represented by proposals for government expenditure to reflate the economy, using a combination of public investment and delayed debt repayment. According to its advocates, these investments will generate new jobs and stimulate private sector activity, creating higher tax returns, as well as reduced unemployment and other benefits payments. Much is made of the potential for 'green' jobs, combining new technologies for energy production and energy efficiency with targets for reduced carbon emissions.

This form of managed capitalism owes a heavy debt to the legacy of Keynesian expansionary policies in the post-war era. A good example is the Obama administration's Recovery and Reinvestment Act, using public investment to stimulate activity during the recession, in this case, for the US wind and solar power industries. A green 'new deal', according to its proponents, offers the

prospect of a rejuvenated capitalism that will generate millions of jobs in new technologies and resurrect the social-democratic contract.

But the entire focus of public policy will be to prioritise capitalist profitability and the interests of transnational corporations in global markets. There will be no attempt to radically restructure economic ownership, and certainly no serious challenge to the underlying growth model. The inevitable outcome, even assuming this limited reform programme was implemented, would be governments that, in the national interest, protected monopoly capital and intensified the ideological attack on workers rights and on the welfare state.

Conclusion

Western nation states provide the political superstructure for globalised capitalism. Their primary function is the legitimation of elite control over power and resources, despite the depth and severity of the capitalist crisis and widespread opposition to the policies of austerity. Through social democratic parties, this political superstructure attempts to absorb, neutralise and dissipate any radical challenges.

A new, national-interest narrative is being constructed that the crisis resulted from government profligacy rather than capitalist greed. But there is no national interest, only class interest. The state continues to provide massive subsidies to transnational corporations, while dismantling the welfare state and any semblance of workers protection. The prospects for a revitalised economy and growth are, according to this narrative, tantalisingly within reach, as long as working people are prepared to accept the discipline of market forces. In reality, this means reduced real wages, longer working hours and a growing underclass, the reserve army of labour, to maintain disciplinary pressure.

Serious, radical challenges to this system of oppression have been made. They raise

profound questions about the relationship between economic power and political representation in an advanced industrial society facing a terminal capitalist crisis. Socialist and anarchist alternatives provide models of new governance and sovereignty, challenging the very existence of nation states that have ceased to represent, in any meaningful way, the interests of working people. Rather than to be feared, the collapse of nation states should be welcomed as a crucial stage in the liberation of working people from an imposed, authoritarian capitalism.

Section Two

Workers Commonwealths – The Politics and Economics of Liberation

Introduction

As outlined previously, and by way of summary, there is a spectrum of responses and proposed solutions to the global crisis. For many, the problems of environmental degradation and resource depletion can be solved by a reformed capitalism that marries enlightened self-interest with effective environmental management and corporate, social responsibility. Market signals, as long as they reflect the full environmental costs of industrial activity, remain the most effective way of utilising scarce resources, maintaining growth and providing social benefit. But the capitalist policy framework, including international agreements on carbon trading and technological solutions like carbon capture, is little more than a green gloss, an environmental fig-leaf to mask the inevitable capitalist dynamic of accelerated carbon emissions and resource depletion.

Keynesian expansionary policies, combining public spending with focused investment on a range of environmental technologies, is held up as a radical restructuring of the economy towards energy efficiency that will also generate millions of new jobs and restore the social democratic contract. Green keynesianism views the crisis as resolvable through a capitalism primed by public expenditure and technological prioritisation. Yet the emphasis on growth in relation to employment generation leaves the fundamental issues of corporate power and class relations unchallenged. Even a substantial increase in the use of renewable technologies and improved environmental efficiency will not disguise the reality of a rampant globalised capitalism and transnational corporations seeking profit through resource exploitation.

Only radical, no-growth, post-capitalist alternatives hold out the prospect of genuine,

democratic control by working people, economic sufficiency rather than material excess, and a full environmental recovery on the basis of zero-carbon emissions. These alternatives draw, to a large extent, on socialist and anarchist theories. Unfortunately, they also have to overcome the disastrous historical legacy of Soviet-style bureaucratic centralism that masqueraded as communism. Here, the abiding image is of failure on a gigantic scale, with a grossly inefficient economy, long queues for even basic goods and foodstuffs, terrible environmental pollution and political oppression.

The emphasis on rapid industrialisation, large-scale manufacturing and collectivised agriculture in the former Soviet Union led to an appalling waste of resources and some of the worst environmental abuses in the 20th Century. But this bore no resemblance to socialism, even as a transitional stage on the road to a fully communist society. Rather, those original hopes and ideals for socialism degenerated into a state capitalism that cemented the power of a party elite and the privileged access of apparatchiks to material goods.

More recently, China's rapid industrial transformation provides an even more graphic representation of how state capitalism can, in the name of communism, combine authoritarian government, massive environmental pollution and now, a global network of resource exploitation. The idea that a truly communist society could ever emerge from a state capitalist one was always ludicrous. Inevitably, both Russia and China have found their niches in the global capitalist system as authoritarian states, enthusiastically embracing free-market ideology.

Far more significant from the perspective of genuine, post-capitalist alternatives, has been the resurgence of interest in local economies. Partly, this has been driven by environmental concerns but also by growing demands for local ownership and real democratic control by working people. A range of projects, including renewable energy systems, local

food growing and local currencies, have already demonstrated clear environmental and economic benefits including reduced carbon emissions and transportation costs, as well as increased local employment.

Ownership is based on not-for-private-profit models like cooperatives, where investment decisions can be made directly by the workers and where a grounding in the activities and wider life of the local community is encouraged. These economies develop greater autonomy as income is retained and circulated through local supplier networks, rather than leached out to corporations and distributed externally in profits and shareholder dividends.

From the perspective of radical alternatives to capitalism, this local economic framework can be easily dismissed as a series of uncoordinated experiments that have some curiosity value but are essentially irrelevant. Any fundamental challenge to globalised capitalism must be made through national and international class struggles based on trade unions and mainstream political parties, even if those forms of struggle have become ossified by the very same political and trade union institutions that claim to reflect the interests of working people.

There are obvious constraints and limitations to local alternatives. Cooperatives must operate within market-based economic disciplines and they face competition from private-sector companies. Despite the welcome emphasis on democratic participation and equality, the survival of individual cooperatives is ultimately dependent on profitability. Acknowledging that such local initiatives constitute only a small proportion of the overall economy and operate within serious market constraints, they still play a very important role in the vanguard of radical alternatives and as signposts to a new, post-capitalist economy.

With the deepening of the global crisis, the demand for alternatives will become even more pressing and incorporate a growing number of sectors. The opportunity exists for

a comprehensive, local economic alternative - a critical mass of local production and distribution that can satisfy the basic material needs of working people. Self-sustaining commonwealths that democratically own and control the means of production, are entirely feasible as an alternative to the global destructiveness of capitalism.

Some appreciation of how radical economic transformations can be brought about in a relatively short timescale can be gauged from recent experiences. The most obvious is the programme carried out by Cuba during the mid 1990s to rapidly expand local food production. From the earliest days of the communist revolution, the United States enforced an economic blockade on the country. As a result, Cuba was heavily dependent on Soviet trade, especially oil in return for its sugar crops, but those favourable terms of trade were withdrawn after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Costs soared, especially for fuel and related materials, in turn badly affecting agricultural production. Cuba faced a massive food shortages and even the possibility of malnutrition on a large scale. In response it embarked on an ambitious programme of local food growing to satisfy domestic needs, through urban community farms, market gardens and other smaller-scale community initiatives. The nearest historical equivalent is to emergency mobilisation, as in Britain during the Second World War, when overseas food supplies were severely disrupted by the Nazi blockade. In both cases the benefits were impressive with a major increase in domestic production, providing a range of foods that ensured a healthy, if basic diet.

Faced with the reality of capitalism's grip on global resources, how would any advanced Western society ever liberate itself through a radical restructuring of the economy? The simple answer is that at the level of the nation state, it cannot. The institutional power that capitalism wields and the imposed restrictions to democratic choice are too great. Alternatives will emerge, instead, from the lived experience of working people

responding locally to the crisis.

Again, as with the Cuba example, there are several historical precedents of how strong, local institutions can be developed in a relatively short timescale to provide economic autonomy in ways that could be applied to advanced capitalist societies. During the late Victorian period, local authorities were pivotal in the funding of major utilities, including gas, water and electricity. Long-term technological and manufacturing investments were made, in turn supporting local supplier networks. Local authorities were also important as land owners, providing tenancies for agricultural workers on farms that supplied their populations with a full range of produce.

This era of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation also saw the emergence of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist models of workers control, through which capitalism and state power could be challenged and overthrown by the revolutionary actions of ordinary working people. Leading anarchist theorists developed a sophisticated analysis of how the productive capacity of modern industry and agriculture could be organised to support a fair distribution of resources.

Economic power rested with working people through local assemblies and guilds of associated industries to plan for production. Clear social goals were agreed, including the equitable distribution of necessary work, allowing the possibility for greater free time on cultural and artistic activities so that the full creative potential of each individual citizen could be realised. But Marxism-Leninism, with its emphasis on state power and giant manufacturing systems, acted to marginalise workers control as a viable, alternative revolutionary model. Such was the threat that, at the height of the Russian revolution, workers councils were brutally suppressed by the Bolsheviks.

Contemporary conditions raise new challenges but there are very strong resonances with the emergence of syndicalism as a viable alternative to a failing capitalist

system. In the early 20th Century, during a period of extended recession and social turmoil, political agitation had spread across Europe and the United States. Radical working-class leaders mobilised millions of workers on docks, the railways and many other industries, to strike for wage increases, reduced working hours and trade union recognition.

But syndicalists also made it very clear that only the fundamental restructuring of the economy could ever truly liberate working people from the shackles of wage slavery and the fear of unemployment. Industrial action was the first stage on the revolutionary road to economic and political emancipation from capitalism. If necessary, force would be used to ensure the gains of any popular revolution were protected from class enemies.

Direct workers control is best exemplified by events during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. A strong anarchist movement, with mass support, led the popular resistance to the regular army and its fascist backers. As the successful vanguard of the armed struggle, anarchists took political control throughout several regions of Spain, notably Catalonia. Several thousand factories were brought under workers control in large cities like Barcelona, while common ownership of land seized from private estates was carried out in rural areas.

The anarchist economy had to function in extreme conditions, not only of the war against the fascists but also of a vicious internal struggle for power with the communists. Yet, during 1936 and 1937, worker-controlled industries maintained regular production, and a fully-functioning transportation system and energy supplies, complemented by food from rural areas. Only with the full militarisation of the economy and the growing attacks of the regular armed forces did the system of anarchist production and supply break down and eventually collapse with the victory of the fascists in 1938. Nevertheless, this remains an important historical example of how an economy, combining industrial and agricultural

production for several million people, could be run on anarchist and syndicalism principles.

Support for syndicalism in Europe and the USA fell away as trade unions were co-opted into mainstream social democracy. But the parallels are clear and the underlying analysis remains as powerful, if not more so, today. Millions of working people now face unemployment or perilous forms of marginalised work at reduced real wages. Welfare and pension provision is being dismantled leaving only a basic safety-net of health and social care for those without the ability to pay. Unlike previous economic recoveries that offered a return towards full employment, depletionist capitalism can only lead to growing social and economic inequalities.

No industrial proletariat exists on the same scale in the advanced economies, but collective forms of anti-capitalist protest involving millions of people have grown in significance. There have also been spontaneous acts of social solidarity including the protection of families facing eviction, the occupation of empty properties to rehouse homeless people, and the raiding of supermarkets for food redistribution to the poor. More recently, local economic action has grown in significance, including food production on otherwise unused private land, as well as bartering and the use of local currencies. These forms of opposition may come from diffuse sources but such solidarity can develop into a revolutionary consciousness and concrete forms of widespread resistance.

Any serious challenge will be met with the coercive power of the state, including a fully militarised police force and if necessary, the deployment of the army. How can working people respond when faced with a determined class enemy prepared to use extreme forms of violence? For many activists who promote radical change, any response other than peaceful protest and non-violent direct action, will be self-defeating since it will only breed further violence and descend into a cycle of

revolutionary and counter-revolutionary destruction.

The pacifist tradition is a significant one, based on successful, non-violent political protests in many countries. But this approach rather conveniently ignores the level of structural violence inherent in capitalist exploitation, and the limitations of such tactics when faced with a determined and well-armed class enemy prepared to maim and kill. The protection of revolutionary gains should best be described, not as the choice between violence and non-violence, but between effective direct action and passive surrender.

Far from creating a spiral of destruction, revolutionary force can prepare the groundwork for a fairer and peaceful society, where working people achieve direct control over economic decision making and have eliminated, once and for all, the coercive powers of the nation state and the structural violence of capitalism.

Transition to workers commonwealths

As the crisis deepens, a clear transitional path can be outlined using the principals of workers control and local production. The main structures of a workers commonwealth are straightforward and can be put in place within a relatively short timescale. Food, housing, transportation and energy are key sectors where local cooperatives are developed that use locally-sourced materials. Through programmes of energy efficiency, recycling and increased use of renewables, the commonwealth is able to guarantee an equitable distribution of resources for the essentials of life, set clear objectives for zero-carbon emissions and the elimination of other industrial pollutants, as well as a range of environmental improvements that protect and enhance ecological diversity.

Funding to support productive capacity is made available through local government bonds, credit union and pension fund investments, and through allocating a proportion of local taxation to industrial

development. Because the emphasis is on using established means of production and accessible technologies, allied to resilience and ease of maintenance, the level of investment funding required is relatively small and manageable through local institutions.

The fundamental issues in developing workers commonwealths over the longer term, therefore, are not industrial, nor financial, but political and ideological. There needs to be a widespread recognition that the human race is in a life or death struggle with a globally destructive capitalism, and that our very survival as a species and the continuation of anything recognisable as advanced industrial societies requires a total democratic renewal.

Only a direct democracy in which economic power is held collectively by working people can ensure the successful transition to a post-capitalist society. Symbols of progress that emerged from early struggles such as universal suffrage and trade union representation were only partial and limited victories. They mask essential truths about the inequality of power relationships between rich and poor, and how unaccountable elites dominate politics in capitalist nation states.

A workers commonwealth, in which economic power rested with ordinary people, would make the vast proportion of decisions directly through their workplaces and local assemblies. As the areas of economic autonomy widened, the shift from anti-democratic, institutional repression to a liberating economic democracy would be achieved. Here, political power flows from economic power and is completely accountable to local communities.

Profound choices will have to be made about political participation and representation. Local assemblies in a workers commonwealth should reflect economic and social contributions to collective goals. The criteria for voting rights rests with the commonwealth on the basis of collective needs and the responsibility to defend and protect it from

any external threat. Certain groups living within the jurisdiction of the commonwealth that generated income from non-productive activities, such as a rentier class living off accumulated assets, will have no voting rights.

Once the commonwealth has reached a certain stage of maturity, it can work with other commonwealths on a regional, and ultimately global basis, to support agreed objectives. This form of economic democracy and representation can then effectively supersede the corrupted and corrupting powers of parliaments and supra-national organisations like the European Union and the United Nations.

Conclusion

The idea of local, workers commonwealths replacing a globalised, capitalist system may seem utopian. But the real fantasists are those who cling onto the belief that we can continue to live in a disney world of unfettered capitalist growth. Technological dazzlements venerated like manna from heaven should not blind us to the fact that the triumphal parade has left in its path billions of people living in poverty and deprivation. Insatiable, elite consumption is robbing future generations of the material and environmental base for a reasonable standard of living, and brings into question our very survival as a species.

Workers commonwealths demonstrate how economic power through the ownership and control of the means of production, is essential for democratic renewal. Political representation flows from the capacity to organise the economy at a local level and to achieve collective goals. For very good reasons, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists attach vital importance to workers control as the bedrock of democratic society. Acts of social solidarity can all be seen as nascent forms of direct democracy where ordinary people attempt to break out of the capitalist straitjacket. But only when a critical mass is achieved, and significant sectors of the economy are taken over, can this be characterised as a workers commonwealth.

During this transitional stage there will be the serious threat of confrontation and the use of co-coercive powers by the state. If working people have taken actions like the occupation of land for food growing, or of abandoned industrial sites for alternative production, they have the right, indeed the obligation, to protect themselves. Where necessary, they may have to use force to defeat their class enemies. For some wedded to concepts of non-violence such action is unacceptable. But revolutionary gains that bring to an end the structural violence of capitalism are worth fighting for and defending.

A vibrant democracy is one where people feel that they make a direct contribution to collective goals and have a real say in their political representation. These goals include the sharing of necessary work, and the liberation of free time to pursue other social and cultural activities. A workers commonwealth is as much about these wider ambitions to realise the full potential of each citizen as it is about economic democracy itself. The ultimate objective is to replace the whole capitalist system by self-governing, self-financing and self-sufficient communities producing for need rather than profit.

Nor are these insular and unconnected to other revolutionary struggles. Far from it. The capacity for a transformative politics at a global level is inherent in workers commonwealths. Together they can effectively by-pass organisations like the United Nations and the European Union that have spectacularly failed to achieve any progress towards major stated goals on the environment and on disarmament. Essentially, these organisations reflect the interests of the dominant states and their elites. Like a benevolent big brother figure, the UN presides over a bloated international bureaucracy, spouting platitudes about the need to save the planet, while its constituent parts merrily roll along doing everything they can to destroy it.

A series of summits have produced nothing of significance on an agreed level of carbon

emission cuts and a timetable for their implementation. Now, there is a growing fatalism that global temperature rises are inevitable at a much higher level than is generally considered by the scientific consensus as acceptable.

Nuclear disarmament has also descended into the realms of fantasy under the United Nations. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty legitimises the policies of the existing nuclear weapons powers to modernise their nuclear armouries, under the banner of maintaining deterrence capability, while at the same time, threatening military action against any other country that has the temerity to want to join their squalid little club. As far as conventional disarmament is concerned, the fact that the permanent members of the Security Council are responsible for the vast proportion of global arms sales speaks volumes for the hypocrisy at the heart of the UN.

These vast bureaucratic machines of international conferences, summits, and corporate and NGA lobbying simply replicate elite capitalist relationships under the banner of a busted UN Charter, with all of its empty rhetoric about universal rights and ending the scourge of war. The United Nation has, and always will remain powerless, and will be put out of its misery.

Instead, environmental standards are achieved by the normal functioning of a workers commonwealth and by agreed timetables for their implementation. All forms of carbon emissions are eliminated and much firmer policies put in place on pollution controls to protect working peoples' health than have ever been envisaged under UN programmes. Similarly, both nuclear and conventional disarmament are brought about through the democratic framework on controlling the means of production, so that no armaments work took place anywhere in the Commonwealths.

Final Conclusion

How to describe the enormity of the global crisis that faces our generation? For some, the best comparison is to an existential emergency requiring the mobilisation of society on a scale and speed only previously required during wartime. For others, to an environmental armageddon, the perfect storm in the hidden tsunami, reflecting the terrible consequences of climate change and the destruction of complex ecosystems. But nothing really captures the unprecedented confluence of human and natural catastrophes unleashed by the forces of capitalism, militarism and nationalism, nor the political, economic and cultural transformation needed to get us out of the mess.

For too long we have been in thrall to an image of capitalism as the motor of an industrial and technological revolution that liberated the human race from the shackles of subsistence living. Even Marxists still converse in a language that equates capitalism with modernity, and as a necessary stage of industrial development before working people can achieve the transformation to a communist society where all material benefits are equally shared.

But it's all smoke and mirrors – an illusion that only works as long as the magician has a vast, infernal machine hidden behind the curtain to produce fluffy rabbits from the capitalist's top hat. Every technological innovation has been a theft from nature, a way of continually rebranding the trick, while using ever higher levels of energy and materials to keep the show on the road. When it goes badly wrong, as in the global crash of 2008-09, the mechanics behind the illusion are brought into sharp focus. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the bankers responsible for the financial meltdown are rewarded with government largesse, while working people are punished by the economics of austerity.

But, as ever, the growth illusion is being resurrected. No matter how deep and how long the crisis, and no matter what the sacrifice in living-standards, we must never question the fundamentals of capitalism as the

vehicle for our material progress. Virtually all mainstream economic analysis is concerned with how we achieve a return to growth. The debate, such as it is, on broader questions of environmental standards and social justice, presupposes a form of social democratic contract that was always fragile and can never be restored.

Future generations will look back on these debates over policies for growth with the same incredulity that we view the medieval, theological disputes as to how many angels could dance on a pinhead; of otherwise reasonably intelligent people making complete idiots of themselves.

Stripped down to its essentials, capitalism is a system for exploitation, disciplining working people through wage slavery while maintaining a reserve army of labour. The one really useful and abiding lesson from our disastrous relationship with capitalism, is that political power flows from economic power and that working people, responsible for the creation of wealth, can only free themselves and build a new democratic society when they take control of the economy. What is on offer, rather than a social contract, is a Faustian pact, where the essence of what makes us truly human is sacrificed for an illusion of growth and material progress that is, in reality, destroying the planet.

As the capitalist crisis enters its pathological phase, the extent of that sacrifice will become increasingly apparent. Both domestically and globally, the authoritarian and imperial control systems are being extended to ensure compliance. A gigantic surveillance network has already been put in place through which security agencies can intercept and analyse every form of electronic communication and monitor the activities and movements of individuals and groups. Combined with new powers of arrest and detention, the state can round up thousands of political activists, under the guise of national security. Legitimate and necessary opposition to capitalism will be demonised as terrorism and political extremism, requiring the full force of the state to protect the people from

themselves.

Globally, the United States and its allies are desperately attempting to maintain the imperial resource-control system. Support for authoritarian regimes continues, including the supply of weapons for internal oppression, in return for guaranteed supplies. Where independence movements challenge corrupt regimes the United States will extend its use of special operations forces and drones in an attempt to crush popular revolutions. If necessary, and despite the grotesque record of death and destruction, the threat of full-scale invasion and occupation cannot be ruled out.

Whatever the nominal status of supplier countries, either as independent states, or as hollow shells where political power rests with regional and local elites, they have become little more than a collection of strategic corridors and compounds in the hierarchy of imperialism. Deals will be done to protect oil pipelines and transit hubs for storage and transportation, involving a combination of domestic armed forces and private security firms provided by Western corporations.

In the grand scheme of depletionist imperialism it can't be any other way. US analysts are now openly debating the last-man-standing scenario; a world of rapidly diminishing resources and the ultimate Darwinian challenge, one winner in the struggle for national survival. Such analysis is both repellent and absurd. Applying a 19th Century model of competing nation-states to resource depletion and environmental breakdown in the 21st Century, completely ignores the accumulated economic and environmental feedback mechanisms that will contribute to the collapse of all nation states. The major imperial powers like the United States and China, because of their dependency on external supplies, are likely to face breakdown sooner rather than later.

These will be desperately dangerous times but they also hold the potential for the liberatory transformation of society. Capitalist powers may, in the name of national security, go to war over resources, but the real objectives of

elite exploitation and authoritarian control cannot be disguised. The only state left for working people is the state of purgatory, a life of punishment and sacrifice in the present for the illusion of prosperity and happiness in the future. Liberation from capitalism also means liberation from the nation state.

Workers commonwealths are, in economic terms, an entirely feasible proposition, using local resources to satisfy the necessities of life. The fundamental issues are really political and ideological, quite simply, having the will to confront and destroy capitalism. Direct democracy represents a revolutionary challenge that can only succeed if people feel engaged and have real economic power from which decisions on political representation, social priorities and cultural opportunities can flow. Ultimately, the whole of the capitalist, national and international system will be dismantled, so that the commonwealths can achieve social justice and shared environmental and disarmament objectives.

Why is it utopian to want a revolutionary economic and political transformation? Why is it utopian to want good housing, good food, and a fair distribution of resources for working people? Why is utopian to want a healed planet where finite resources are kept in the ground? Why is it utopian to want comprehensive disarmament? Why is it utopian to want eco-systems that are enjoyed for their diversity and complexity of life rather than exploited for their economic utility? A post-capitalist alternative is not utopian - it is absolutely necessary.