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Scaling Across and Capitalism's False Promises

Eric Fleischmann

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Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze's *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* is a fantastic survey of decentralized anti-capitalist projects across the globe. In particular, they use the examples of Unitierra—"a new form of university"—and the Zapatistas in Mexico to identify the difference between "scaling up" and "scaling across," with the former being the normal capitalist mode of expansion whereby processes are standardized and replicated on greater and greater scales and the latter being the sharing of ideas and resources amongst many local movements while respecting the particularities of those movements—through what they call "trans-local learning." The Berkana Institute defines this term as...

a process for connecting communities who have solutions to share. These solutions, technologies and methods are carried from one place to another and take root in a new local environment. There they emerge into something different, influenced by local culture, flavor and forms.

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These are extremely important concepts for conceptualizing a way out of capitalism, as they imply “that the kind of large-scale systems change that many of us have been yearning for emerges when local actions get connected globally—while preserving their deeply local culture, flavor, and form. What if people working at the local level were able to learn from one another, practice together, and share their knowledge—freely and fluidly—with communities anywhere?” And what I want to specifically point out is the manner in which scaling across (and trans-local learning) can fulfill the promises that capitalism cannot, by its own internal logic, keep—namely the establishment of a global society of free individuals.

Capitalism is often touted as being a system that prioritizes individual freedom over collective equality, with socialism being the other way around and therefore undesirable. However, Corey Robin explains that...

[t]he socialist argument against capitalism isn't that it makes us poor. It's that it makes us unfree. When my well-being depends upon your whim, when the basic needs of life compel submission to the market and subjugation at work, we live not in freedom but in domination. Socialists want to end that domination: to establish freedom from rule by the boss, from the need to smile for the sake of a sale, from the obligation to sell for the sake of survival.¹

This dictatorial reality of both the hierarchical workplace and the centralized market in necessities like food, water, and health-care is difficult to deny if you have any experience as a layperson

¹ I would argue that “submission to the market” is only a genuine issue in the context of an unfree capitalist market. For information on freed, non-capitalist markets see “The Freed Market” by William Gillis and “Markets Freed from Capitalism” by Charles Johnson in *Markets Not Capitalism*.

in the present economy, so capitalist apologists often argue that at least when it comes to non-essential consumption people have a great deal of freedom; if you save enough money, you get to buy the latest clothes you want to wear, the type computer you want to use, and the variety of coffee you want to drink. Essentially: you endure the unfreedom of the workplace and economy in general to experience the freedom and diversity of capitalist consumption. But Wheatley and Frieze point to the “uniformity of any Starbucks, McDonalds, or Wal-Mart” as a counter-example against this claim. They explain that scaling up “creates a monoculture that relies on replication, standardization, promotion, and compliance.”

This can be directly contrasted with those anti-capitalists movements in Mexico related—in one way or another—to Uniterria and/or the Zapatistas like the Red Autónoma para la Soberanía Alimentaria (Autonomous Network for Food Sovereignty), which promotes the right for communities “to decide for themselves what they eat and their ability to produce it;” or the Autonomous Centre for the Intercultural Creation of Appropriate Technologies, where “there are bicycle-powered machines, solar ovens, dry compost toilets, humanure and vermicomposting (ways of harvesting organic waste as fertilizer), rainwater catchment systems, small-scale urban agriculture and ecobuilding projects, recycled alternative fuels, and even a bit of wind power.” All of these processes work together to strengthen “the autonomous learning capacity of people, communities, and neighborhoods to generate economic and social self-sufficiency.” And further, the groups of people taking part in this embodiment of scaling across both abolish the distinction between producer and consumer and allow their individual constituents genuine control over their lives and consumption. Not only this, the authors write in their breakdown of scaling across that “people eagerly support those things [they’ve] had a hand in creating,” and it is just this “having a hand” in creation that is the principle by which cooperative enterprises and community-owned projects address the aforementioned unfreedom of the capitalist

workplace, as a localized economy made up of these efforts represents a fundamentally democratic mode of production.

Alongside individual freedom, one of the supposed values of capitalism is its universal nature and, consequently, ability to structure a global society. And Wheatley and Frieze explain that trans-local learning is not opposed to globalization—in fact it welcomes the flow of “ideas and resources” across the planet. What it opposes is the globalization “of multinational corporations, of free trade, of economic development” which implies “universality, a single solution, product, or ideology that could be applied anywhere, regardless of place, people, or culture.” And policies of this kind of globalization like ‘free’ trade are anything but free—with ongoing border imperialism, special privileges given to corporations, and ideas captured through intellectual property laws. Ultimately, Noam Chomsky explains that...

[t]he dominant propaganda systems have appropriated the term “globalization” to refer to the specific version of international economic integration that they favor, which privileges the rights of investors and lenders, those of people being incidental. In accord with this usage, those who favor a different form of international integration, which privileges the rights of human beings, become “anti-globalist.”²

‘Anti-globalists’ therefore can (and do) utilize scaling across and trans-local to embrace the genuine free movement of ideas, resources, and people because, as Wheatley and Frieze write, “the only way large-scale change could happen is by inviting ideas and resources to flow around the globe.” And the beginnings of large-scale in this manner can be seen in the form of alter-globalization, which Arun Kumar Pokhrel identifies as “various social movements that seek global cooperation and interaction to

² See Chomsky’s interview with Sniježana Matejčić.

resist the negative social, political, economic, and environmental impacts of the contemporary neoliberal globalization” such as the “broadening gap between the rich and the poor, environmental destruction, and the escalation of civil and international conflicts.”

Individual freedom is good! Global cooperation is good! And it is under these assumptions that capitalism attempts to position itself as good as well. But it will not and cannot actually bring about these socio-economic qualities. The question then needs to be posed from the above observations: if scaling across through trans-local learning combined with other anti-capitalist strategies can grant people the freedom and global connectedness that capitalism falsely promises, can it grant them on a scale great enough to subvert and even replace capitalism? This may seem like a daunting and sometimes impossible task but as Ursula K Le Guin proclaims, “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”