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Michael Albert's "Parecon" and Reformist Strategy

Strategies for change

Wayne Price

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At the 2008 New York City Annual Anarchist Bookfair, I was on a panel with a spokesperson for "Parecon" ("participatory economics"; Albert, 2003). Discussing the work of Michael Albert, co-inventer of the Parecon program, I stated that his strategy for getting from capitalism to Parecon was reformist, or at least non-revolutionary. This was vigorously denied by the Parecon spokesperson. This is the topic I want to cover here. I am not discussing Parecon itself, which is a vision of a post-capitalist economy managed neither by the market nor by central planning. Instead there would be planning from below by repeated negotiations among workers' and consumers' councils. Without going into it, I believe that this idea has enriched the discussion of how a libertarian socialism might work. My question is how to achieve this new society.

I have previously discussed the reformist strategy of Robin Hahnel (2005), the other co-founder of Parecon (Price, 2005). But Albert states (2006) that the two of them have become es-

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tranged (as if Marx and Engels were to split up!). We cannot assume that what Hahnel says is what Albert believes.

Albert has not written much about tactics and strategy for reaching Parecon, as compared to his writing on how a pareconist society might work. One work which did focus on strategy was a little book, *The Trajectory of Change: Activist Strategies for Social Transformation* (2002). His approach for a movement is stated summarily:

“Short term, we raise social costs until elites agree to implement our demands or end policies we oppose. Longer term, we accumulate support and develop movement infrastructure and alternative institutions, while working toward transforming society’s defining relations.” (2002; p. x)

That is, we cannot force the state to end a particular war or to grant universal health care, but it may do it if the rulers fear that there will be a spread of radicalization among the people; if there is increased militancy among workers, youth, soldiers, and People of Color; if society becomes increasingly polarized and ungovernable. This is precisely what happened in the 60s and which led to the end of legal racial segregation and of the Vietnam war.

So far, so good. A revolutionary anarchist would completely agree with this orientation. As opposed to the liberal strategy of permeating the centers of power and making changes from above, it proposes to pressure the state and capitalists from outside and below. It demonstrates why a revolutionary perspective is relevant even in non-revolutionary periods (which are most of the time): the more militant and disrespectful a movement is (that is, the more revolutionary it is), the more likely it is even to win reforms.

But is Albert for revolution? In this book he discusses the role of “revolutionaries.” He writes of “our commitment to ultimately revolutionize all aspects of life...This country needs a revolution...” (2002; pp. 119, 122). In his memoir (2006) he makes it clear that he regards himself as a revolutionary. What

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may be on the side of the counterrevolution during a revolutionary upheaval. It is really impossible to predict, especially since we are so far from any actual revolution. To be so sure that “the seizure [of power] itself and the following period of construction will likely be relatively peaceful” is to disarm the workers and oppressed ahead of time.

For reasons of space, I have not discussed other aspects of Michael Albert’s program, such as his concept of “non-reformist reforms,” his view of the working class, his odd belief that the managerial “coordinators” are not a pro-capitalist class, or his odder admiration for Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara (who were hardly antistatist Marxists). Like me, Albert comes out of the councilist, antistatist, tradition of socialist anarchism and libertarian Marxism (although he no longer calls himself a socialist). Like us, he aims for an economy which is neither centrally planned nor market-oriented. He believes that a movement needs a vision of a better world (although I do not think it needs to be as detailed as his Parecon blueprint). He also agrees with us about building a democratic movement from below, which challenges the centers of capitalist power by threatening them from outside.

There are many areas where we revolutionary anarchists can work with Albert and others who advocate Parecon. However, there are fundamental weaknesses in his program for achieving a new society (as in the thinking of Robin Hahnel, that is, of both of the founders of Parecon). He does not warn of counterrevolutionary violence. He disarms the working class and oppressed by predicting that the change to pareconism can be done peacefully. He has advocated participating in elections, in support of capitalist parties, which crosses the class line. Subjectively he regards himself as a revolutionary, but his practice is really reformist and nonrevolutionary (or at least “centrist,” revolutionary in rhetoric but reformist in practice). With all respect for his contributions to the anti-capitalist movement, Albert’s program is fatally flawed.

he means by revolutionary, however, is someone who advocates a totally new society, which he does.

As I have argued before (Price, 2006), this is based on a misconception which confuses the difference between liberalism and socialism with the difference between reformist socialism and revolutionary socialism (including anarchism). Liberalism wishes to keep capitalist society but to make improvements; socialism aims for a new kind of society. But there have been differences between those socialists who hoped to reach a new society by gradual, peaceful, and legal changes, and those who believed that eventually there would have to be a confrontation with the capitalist state, its overthrow and dismantling. Historically, most reformist socialists claimed to be for an eventual new society, as opposed to the liberals. Today this is easily forgotten, when the various Social Democratic, Labor, and Communist parties have abandoned all claim to be for a different type of social system.

To be a revolutionary is to advocate a revolution. It is to point out that the state will not permit peaceful, gradual, legal, changes to a better social system. It is to WARN the people that when the economy gets worse, the capitalists will take back the reforms they have given in the past—as they have begun to do. At some point, when the capitalists feel threatened enough, they will whip up racist and sexual hysteria. They will abandon bourgeois democracy, cancel elections, organize fascist gangs, smash unions, murder leftists, and arrange a military coup. Working people need to prepare to defend ourselves, to strengthen unions, and to engage in general (city-wide) strikes. We need to popularize the idea of workers’ and community councils, for replacing the state, and of an armed working class, for replacing the specialized police and military.

None of this is in Albert’s work. He wants a drastic change in society, but he does not expect it to need a revolution (what most people would mean by revolution, on the order of the

U.S., French, or Russian revolutions). He does not warn of the dangers of counterrevolutionary, fascist, repression.

He believes in building a militant mass movement, but he believes that one way this can be done is through electoralism. Not only does he support third-party capitalist candidates (Nader, the Green party) but he supported Jesse Jackson's campaign inside the capitalist, racist, pro-war, imperialist, Democratic party (Albert, 1994). He seemed surprised when the so-called Rainbow Coalition turned from movement-building to supporting Jackson's deal-making. Working with capitalist parties is not only naïve but it crosses the class line. He does not warn the workers that Parecon cannot be voted in, the capitalist state is designed to prevent that. Even if Pareconists won an election, the result would be something like when Lincoln won the 1860 election; the slaveowners refused to accept their defeat, taking the leading military officers and organized to overthrow the government and break up the country in a bloody counterrevolution.

Like Hahnel, Albert believes in building alternate institutions in the present to demonstrate how Parecon might work. Such institutions (coops, collectives, democratic publishing groups, etc.) would face not only the state, but the forces of the marketplace, where capitalism is dominant. Many such attempts fail. Others succeed, only to be integrated into the capitalist economy. These organizations are good in themselves, but cannot play a major role in changing capitalism. I live in a self-administered housing coop, run by the tenants without even a professional manager. It provides good housing but is not a threat to the bourgeoisie.

In 1978, writing with Robin Hahnel, he sketched out how a "socialist revolution" might be carried out. There would be a "revolutionary councilist organization" or "party." In workplaces and neighborhoods, the revolutionaries would organize people to fight back over economic, racial, gender, and other issues. They would seek to build popular councils of workers and

oppressed people, to replace state functions in the communities and to challenge the managers in factories and workplaces. Workers' councils would take over the worksites. Neighborhood councils would take over the communities. The councils would federate. The revolutionary organization would dissolve into the councils. This would be the contest for power against the state and capitalism, to be followed by building a new society.

As the councilist movement spread and solidified, there would be an increasing danger of state repression. The authors' main response to this is the need to avoid "adventurism" or "premature strikes." They had previously mentioned the need for "people's patrols" but that is only "to deal with juvenile delinquency and mugging" (p. 336). They refer to mass struggles "all without and also often with militant self-defense" (p. 337), which is rather vague.

They wrote that readers may interpret this sketch to imply "an essentially non-violent dynamic" (p. 352)—which seems reasonable to me—but they deny this. "...There is considerable violence likely during the whole preparatory series of struggles leading up to the actual final seizure of power. But the seizure itself and the following period of construction will likely be relatively peaceful" (p. 352). They expect to have won over most of the ranks of the military as well as the big majority of the population by the time of a seizure of power.

The prediction of repression and considerable violence during the preparatory period of struggles has dropped out of Albert's writings, as has the concept of a "final seizure of power." Programmatically, he has abandoned talk of a need for people's patrols and militant self-defense.

But he still believes in a mostly non-violent change. This may be so. However, the U.S. has a large middle class (including what pareconists call the "coordinator class") and widespread racist, superpatriotic, and superstitious beliefs among many workers. A large proportion of the population