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Conclusion

A nonviolence strategy against capitalism needs to be built on nonviolent analysis, nonviolent goals and nonviolent methods. The analysis of capitalism should be from a nonviolence perspective, with special attention to the violent foundations of the system. The ultimate goal is a nonviolent alternative to capitalism, in which there is no organised violence. The methods used to move towards the goal are the familiar techniques of nonviolent action.

Many courageous and committed people have undertaken nonviolent campaigns to challenge capitalism or aspects of it. However, seldom has this been linked to any overall strategy for nonviolent transformation of capitalism. Most nonviolent analysis has focussed on cases of overt repression, aggression or oppression, such as dictatorship, military attack and racial discrimination. The exercise of power in capitalism is more multilayered. Therefore an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism, from a nonviolent perspective, is absolutely vital for developing a nonviolence strategy.

The analysis in this book is one example of how to proceed, but there are other possibilities. For a nonviolent transformation of capitalism to occur, lots of people will need to be involved, and they need to have a grasp of how the system operates, how change can occur and what sorts of initiatives are likely to be most fruitful. That means that a useful nonviolent analysis has to be one whose fundamentals are readily understood. It is unwise to depend on a few experts or gurus. Circumstances will vary according to the local situation. Global capitalist dynamics will change. Participants in nonviolent activism need to be able to analyse, plan, evaluate and innovate. Nonviolent action is a participatory approach to social change, and likewise the analysis to accompany the action should be as participatory as possible.

Nonviolence strategy should be thought of as a tool, not a strait-jacket. It is a way of thinking and planning, but in all cases

judgement is needed. Local situations rarely fit the ideal model postulated in analyses. The perfect campaign is seldom possible. Adaptations or compromises need to be made. For these reasons, unthinking use of a formula for change is potentially disastrous. Analysis and planning needs to be participative, creative and adaptable. Understanding fundamentals is important, but there is no automatic path to the “correct” action.

The analysis in this book is at a fairly general level. As well as such general assessments, it’s vital to develop detailed strategies taking into account local history, culture, experience, opposition, allies and a host of other factors that are specific to the situation. That is something that can only be done effectively by people with local knowledge and experience.

Why nonviolence? For some people, a moral commitment is the foundation for their adherence to nonviolent principles. But it is also possible to support a path based on nonviolence for pragmatic reasons. The strategies against capitalism based on capturing state power, and using the state’s police and military power, have consistently failed. Nonviolence strategy deserves a chance.

A nonviolence strategy against capitalism has the great advantage that it is self-consistent: its methods are compatible with its goal. If one believes in a cooperative, egalitarian, nonviolent economic future, in which priority is given to serving those in greatest need, then a nonviolence strategy cannot be too damaging, because it incorporates those features in its methods.

It is important to remember that capitalism is not the only source of suffering in the world. There are other major systems of domination, including state repression, racism and patriarchy. Nonviolent action can be and has been used against these systems, probably more effectively so far than against capitalism. Nonviolence is thus a multipurpose approach to social change. It does not set aside certain problems until “after the revolution”—a common approach among old-style socialists. For many activists, other problems are more pressing or useful targets than capitalism. Nonviolent anticapitalist struggle should not take automatic precedence over other struggles, but instead should be one struggle among many.

It is also important to keep the focus on what the real problems are. Capitalism results in exploitation, death, alienation and many other ills. It is these that need to be opposed. Destroying and replac-

ing capitalism is pointless if there is the same level of suffering in the new system. The danger is that the abstract entity “capitalism” is seen as the embodiment of evil, rather than just as a system that causes unnecessary suffering.

Can capitalism be reformed? Certainly. It is far less damaging in some countries than others. Should reform be the goal? That depends.

One of the greatest challenges for activists is to live in a society, fully aware of its shortcomings, while keeping alive the vision of a radical alternative, and maintaining enthusiasm for actions that may only seem to move the slightest distance towards that alternative. Reforms are more achievable than revolutionary transformation and offer concrete evidence that change is possible.

The term “capitalism” can give the impression that capitalism is a yes or no proposition: either you have it or you don’t, so the only alternative to acceptance of capitalist hegemony is total eradication through revolution. In this way of thinking, reform is pointless. Actually, though, not all capitalisms are equally bad. Reforms do make a difference to people’s lives.

Rather than saying that we live in a capitalist society, it may be better to say that we live in a society with many capitalist aspects.¹ The goal then is to oppose and replace the damaging capitalist aspects while promoting positive noncapitalist aspects. The challenge is to make this a sustainable process.

One idea is to promote “nonreformist reforms,” namely reforms that lay the basis for further change.² Nonviolence strategies are excellent candidates since they have the advantage that ends are built into means, so reform is less likely to undercut the potential for long-term change.

Campaigning and cultural change

Chapters 7 through 12 discussed campaigns, namely organised efforts to bring about change. Campaigns are planned and are readily observed, making it easy to analyse them. However, there is another approach to change, based on small, local, individual actions.³ Manifestations of this sort of change include:

- not noticing or not commenting on a friend or neighbour’s purchase of fashionable clothes or the latest appliance;

- making information publicly available, by leaflets, newsletters or the web, in violation of intellectual property laws;
- bending business rules in order to help those in need rather than put profit first;
- spending extra time visiting friends rather than earning more money;
- refusing to buy goods from especially exploitative companies;
- not wearing clothing bearing commercial slogans or symbols;
- sharing possessions;
- doing things for others on a voluntary or barter basis, rather than using money;
- abstaining from unnecessary purchases;
- donating land, goods or labour for communal benefit;
- making critical comments about capitalist ways of viewing the world.

These are examples of the many possible “small ways” of acting that challenge or gently undermine the capitalist framework. Do these provide a real threat to capitalism as a system? They are not as easy to analyse as campaigns. Some of the “actions” may be quite subtle, such as the tone of voice used when friends discuss job options or when employees discuss corporate policies. Yet such small actions may have, in combination, significant effects.

The advantages of campaigns are obvious: they directly confront social problems and build alternatives. But because they are visible, they can be more readily attacked or coopted. And because they involve collective action, they are susceptible to internal conflict over status, positions and control.

Small ways of acting avoid these problems: they are too individual and fleeting to be the subject of major counterattack. They can be done by anyone at virtually any time, without requiring coordination or organisation. Their shortcoming is that they often have little or no effect.

Campaigns and small individual actions reinforce each other. Campaigns make issues visible, giving encouragement for individual action. Small actions provide a supportive climate for campaigning. In short, campaigning and cultural change go hand in hand. It is easier to observe and analyse campaigns. Perhaps it would be valuable to study and consciously use some of the small ways of acting.

No one knows for sure how to go about replacing capitalism with a better system. There are many possible ways to proceed, and not enough assessment of what works and what doesn't. It is almost certain to be a very long-term process. Therefore it makes a lot of sense to learn as much as possible about how best to go about it. There is a need for experimentation, innovation and evaluation. There is a lot to be done. With participatory approaches, there should be a lot of people to do it.

Notes

1 J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

2 André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

3 Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).