Seeding a Post-Capitalist Future

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This is a pre-proposal for an Honors Colloquium series devoted to ideas that might help to create a better world. In its current form, this is a discussion document to generate a proposal for the series.

The topics —such as employee ownership, decision making by consensus, prison abolition, a mix of dreams and reality— cover alternatives for our economic system and its almost-universally accepted social constructs of private ownership and the absurdities of top-down organization.

Seeding a Post-Capitalist Future features a prefigurative politics perspective, and offers an array of social critics of the present, exponents of present-day changes, and dreamers about the future. In addition, there is a line-up of theorists to describe the human and physical constraints.

Note that colors indicate live links; they will not survive on paper. The latest version of this work in progress can be found here:


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I. THE STATE OF THIS THING

A. Changes Made Since Rev I

Added Brian Maynard, Pat Logan and Mark Conley to the Board of “Elders.”
Mark Conley, URI’s Choral director, is interested in adding a choral performance to the program. This could possibly be in collaboration with somebody like André de Quadros, who has been involved in projects such as Musics in Prisons and Cultural activity is an empowered alternative to violence.[1]

B. What This Is

This is a pre-proposal and a discussion document for an Honors Colloquium series for the spring of 2014, possibly later. Although some of the ideas were inspired by exchanges with some of you, this document reflect my taste and vision, without pretense of balance or objectivity. I am willing to do a substantial fraction of the actual work involved in running the Honors Colloquium, but there will have to be (probably two) others who will make a comparable commitment. Obviously, shared responsibility must lead to changes in this tentative proposal; bring them on!

For a preview, fast-forward to the schedule proposed in Table I at the end. Also the index at the top will give a quick impression of this proposal. It has become more verbose than originally intended, to a large extent because of the mass of lengthy quotes included to present the suggested speakers in their own voices.

C. Board of “Elders”

To the best of my recollection the following faculty members have expressed interest in this proposal. Please correct me by addition or subtraction.

1. Paul Bueno de Mesquita
2. Leo Caroll
3. Mark Conley
4. Alfred Killilea
5. Pat Logan
6. Scott Molloy
A little over two decades ago, Francis Fukuyama, political scientist and political economist, astonishingly argued that in Western liberal democracy humanity might have found the “end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution.”[2] Chris Hedges,[3] a prophet of doom rather than hubris, argued that: “Unfettered capitalism is a revolutionary force that consumes greater and greater numbers of human lives until it finally consumes itself.”

Fukuyama may have distanced himself from what he advocated in the nineties, but he drew a telling caricature of mainstream Western thinking. Even as deregulated capitalism riotously generates Hedges’s nightmares of social despair and destruction of the biosphere,[4] many can no longer conceive of better alternatives.

Almost one hundred years ago Bertrand Russell wrote in *Political Ideals*:

> Political and social institutions are to be judged by the good or harm that they do to individuals. Do they encourage creativeness rather than possessiveness? Do they embody or promote a spirit of reverence between human beings? Do they preserve self-respect?[5]

Can anyone disagree with these values and doubt that we dramatically fail in their realization? After all, we spend 60% of the discretionary budget on so-called national defense.[6] Combine that with an incarceration rate that exceeds by an order of magnitude.[7] the rates
of Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan, and it becomes difficult to disagree with Vijay Prashad when he states: “Prisons and war are the rational extensions of the system in which we live.”[8]

It is our duty to educate not only the next technically literate generation, but also the dreamers who can contemplate a “transvaluation of all values.” Thus, this proposal outlines a series of lectures that envision an alternative to our current possessive, hyper-violent culture. The proposed series consist of interrelated segments described in the following subsections.

A. Current Crises

Our current society is marked by racism and numerous other forms of discrimination, poverty, growing inequality, disappearance of the middle class, and absence of participatory democracy. Climate change existentially threatens the biosphere. Too much to cover exhaustively, but the lectures will make a selection that conveys that both values and technology are needed to inform our vision of the future. In the tentative schedule presented in Table I, you will find suggestions for topics and speakers who can cover some of the essentials. Topics and speakers are supplied in the next subsections.

B. Alternatives for a Better World

1. Pluralist Commonwealth

Having outlined the crisis of our current system, the series will explore alternative ways of organizing society. Gar Alperovitz, in the second edition of his book America Beyond Capitalism,[9] presents “a set of eminently practical ideas that promise a truly democratic society” to use Howard Zinn’s words. From the summary on the book’s back cover:

Gar Alperovitz’s expert diagnosis of the long-term structural crisis of the American economic and political system is accompanied by detailed, practical answers to the problems we face as a society. [...] Alperovitz marshals years of research into emerging “new economy” strategies to present a comprehensive picture of practical bottom-up efforts currently underway in thousands of communities
across the United States. All democratize wealth and empower communities, not corporations: worker-ownership, cooperatives, community land trusts, social enterprises, along with many supporting municipal, state and longer term federal strategies as well. [9]

Alperovitz presents a wealth of information about what is already happening:

Here are a few little-known facts: More people are now involved in some 11,500 companies wholly or substantially owned by employees than are members of unions in the private sector. There are more than 4,000 nonprofit community development corporations that build housing and create jobs in cities across the nation.[10]

Central in the Alperovitz’s discussion of alternatives to the current system of corporate capitalism is the Pluralist Commonwealth[11]

If changing the ownership of capital is important, then precisely how is this idea to be demonstrated and conveyed to large numbers of Americans in everyday life?

[...]

Most Americans have been taught to think of social ownership as inherently inefficient, undemocratic, even tyrannical. In the near term, the various practical efforts the book reports upon may be as important for what they teach about possibilities as what they accomplish in altering major trends. In this sense they are both precedents and instruments of popular education which help teach the practicality and common-sense nature of new principles. They may also slowly help build and nourish a larger community-building and more cooperative culture.[12]

2. Community Economics

One of the most spectacular co-op developments was announced in March of 2012, by the United Steelworkers, Mondragon, and the Ohio Employee Ownership Center. They presented plans for a detailed union co-op model featuring worker ownership. However, one
does not have to go very far to find numerous, small-scale examples of community economies that illustrate the developments described by Alperovitz.

References 13–17 unsystematically list such community-level, non-traditional economic developments.

3. Decision-Making by Consensus

Ownership is only one part of the organization of a society. The process of how decisions are made is equally important. Currently, top-down models are the rule. These feudal systems tend to combine bunker mentality at the top with foot-dragging at the bottom. Parliamentary systems based on Robert’s Rules of Order would be a revolutionary step forward. Such systems are by many seen as the only conceivable democratic alternative. This is strange given that, across civilizations, majoritarian democracy is exception rather than rule, as far as group decisions are concerned.[18]

Consensus-based systems, which by design are collaborative and egalitarian, are of course much more in line with Russell’s criteria. One particular system is called Sociocracy, a.k.a. the sociocratic circle-organization method.[19, 20]

Sociocracy was developed in the Quaker tradition by Kees Boeke in the Netherlands in the 1940s, and it was refined by his student Gerard Endenburg for use in his engineering company in the 1970s. See this web site for more details. A variety of corporations, small businesses, nursing homes, educational institutions, and community organizations operate according to the principles of sociocracy.[21]

There are four key design principles and the following is a condensed version of this Wikipedia article.

Decision Making on Policy Issues by Consent: Decisions are made by informed consent, barring “paramount objections.”

Organizing in Circles: The organization consists of a hierarchy of semi-autonomous circles each with their own responsibility within the organization.

Double-Linking: Circles are connected to the next higher circle by a double link. Two linking representatives function as full members of both circles. At the highest level, there is a “top circle,” similar to a “board of directors.”
Elections by Consent: Individuals are elected to function in particular responsibilities in discussion using uniform principles of consent.

4. Urban Agriculture

Issues of community ownership and governance naturally lead to the environmental justice and urban agriculture movements of which Majora Carter is a most eloquent representative:

Now listen, I do not expect individuals, corporations or government to make the world a better place because it is right or moral. This presentation today only represents some of what I’ve been through, like a tiny little bit. You’ve no clue. But I’ll tell you later if you want to know. But —I know it’s the bottom line, or one’s perception of it, that motivates people in the end. I’m interested in what I like to call the “triple bottom line” that sustainable development can produce. Developments that have the potential to create positive returns for all concerned: the developers, government and the community where these projects go up.[22]

The South Bronx is only one of many places where urban blight has been transformed into what might hint at the city of the future. David and Sarika Suzuki discuss Detroit, a perfect example of the boom-bust cycles of unfettered capitalism and the supposedly efficient monoculture it tends to engender.[23]

5. Prison Abolition

Before his untimely death in 2012, Joel Olson characterized the Occupy movement as “among the most inspiring events in the U.S. in the 21st century.”[24] At the same time he identified racial tension as a paramount threat to the movement:

Left colorblindness is the enemy

Left colorblindness is the belief that race is a “divisive” issue among the 99%, so we should instead focus on problems that “everyone” shares. According to this argument, the movement is for everyone, and people of color should join it rather than attack it.
As long as left colorblindness dominates our movement, there will be no 99%. There will instead be a handful of whites claiming to speak for everyone. When people of color have to enter a movement on white people’s terms rather than their own, that’s not the 99%. That’s white democracy.

The white democracy exists today. Take any social indicator—rates for college graduation, home ownership, median family wealth, incarceration, life expectancy, infant mortality, cancer, unemployment, median family debt, etc.—and you’ll find the same thing: whites as a group are significantly better off than any other racial group.[24]

An integral part of Seeding Post-Capitalist Future is the vision of the prison abolition movement, such as Critical Resistance, which strives for the “creation of genuinely healthy, stable communities that respond to harm without relying on imprisonment and punishment.” As Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains:

So, what is abolition? In the anti-prison world, we’ve tried hard to find ways to say what we mean that cannot be recuperated, that can’t be displaced or turned back or turned into non-reformist reform. In other words, what we tried to do is describe the problem and our solutions to it in such a way that prison cannot be thought of as a normal, future condition for any society, but rather that the future social order will in part be organized by the absence of prisons, as all-purpose solutions to social problems.[25]

Angela Davis has drawn attention to this problem since the 1970s: “If prison was the state-sanctioned destination for activists such as myself, it was also used as a surrogate solution to social problems associated with poverty and racism.”[26] Michelle Alexander is a passionate, articulate newcomer to the abolitionist “non-reformist reform” movement.

In her book, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,[27], a New York Times bestseller, she says: “We have not ended the racial caste in America: we have merely redesigned it.” The result, as she continues to explain, is a new racial under-caste, defined largely by race, legalized discrimination, and social exclusion. In her words:
the get-tough movement, politics of racial division that birthed a penal system unparalleled in world history. The systematic mass incarceration of poor people, particularly poor folks of color, has emerged as a new caste system, one specifically designed to address the social, political, and economic challenges of our time. It is the moral equivalent of Jim Crow.

Now, there was a time when I rejected this kind of talk. I thought people who made comparisons between mass incarceration and Jim Crow, or mass incarceration and slavery, were exaggerating or engaging in distortions and hyperbole, and I actually thought that people who made those kinds of claims were doing more harm than good to efforts to reform the criminal-justice system and achieve greater racial equality in the United States.[28]

C. Global Revolt

To broaden the provincial perspective characteristic of national conversation, some of the lectures will be devoted to developments elsewhere on the globe. Once again, too much to cover:

- Canada’s *Idle No More*
- Global *Occupy* coming out of “nowhere”
- Iceland’s *Kitchenware Revolution*
- Spain’s *M15 Indignados*
- The *Arab Spring*
- Israel’s *J14 Movement*
- Argentina’s 2001 and 2012 *Caserolozos* and the *Piquetero Movement*[29–31]
- The *Landless Workers’ Movement* in Brazil (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* aka *MST*).[32]
- The *Zapatistas* in Mexico[33]
• Nameless movements of the marginalized of society battling privatization in Perú, Paraguy and Urugay\[34]\n
• The “Maoist-Ghandian” guerrillas in India.\[35, 36]\n
• How about Africa?

D. Dreamers & Visionaries

Our culture assumes values and goals that are generally perceived as self-evident. Time to introduce some who can see beyond this.

1. Re-Evaluating the Economic Growth Paradigm

Charles Eisenstein is someone who, in his own words, does “a lot of public speaking, both on money-related topics and on topics of civilization, transition, consciousness, technology, and transformation.” And:

So ubiquitous is the equation of growth with prosperity that few people ever pause to consider it. What does economic growth actually mean? It means more consumption — and consumption of a specific kind: more consumption of goods and services that are exchanged for money. That means that if people stop caring for their own children and instead pay for childcare, the economy grows. The same if people stop cooking for themselves and purchase restaurant takeaways instead.

[...]

Why, then, are liberals and conservatives alike so fervent in their pursuit of growth?

The reason is that our present money system can only function in a growing economy. Money is created as interest-bearing debt: it only comes into being when someone promises to pay back even more of it. Therefore, there is always more debt than there is money.\[37]\n
Also see his book *Sacred Economics*; in keeping with Eisenstein’s world view, it is available as an online gift.\[38]\n
2. Debt and Beyond

David Graeber, an anthropologist, also fits very well into this thread with his historical and cross-cultural perspective on debt:

The very fact that we don’t know what debt is, the very flexibility of the concept, is the basis of its power. If history shows anything, it is that there’s no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt — above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it’s the victim who’s doing something wrong. Mafiosi understand this.[39]

3. Whose Personal Data?

Jaron Lanier has interesting views on the social impact of technology and pervasive personal data mining. He has worked for Microsoft in a remarkable arrangement that encouraged him to criticize his consultee in public. Lanier has worked for several of the winner-take-all corporations that dominate the information market. Here is a transcript of some of his musings:

I’m astonished at how readily a great many people I know, young people, have accepted a reduced economic prospect and limited freedoms in any substantial sense, and basically traded them for being able to screw around online. There are just a lot of people who feel that being able to get their video or their tweet seen by somebody once in a while gets them enough ego gratification that it’s okay with them to still be living with their parents in their 30s, and that’s such a strange trade-off. And if you project that forward, obviously it does become a problem.

[...]Essentially what happened with finance is a larger scale, albeit more abstract version of what happened with Walmart, where a global system was optimized by being able to build data that could be concentrated locally using a computer network. It tremendously enriched the people who ran the network.
What we have to do to create liberty in the future is to monetize more and more instead of monetize less and less, and in particular we have to monetize more and more of what ordinary people do, unless we want to make them into wards of the state. That’s the stark choice we have in the long-term.[40]

E. Liberal Arts Perspectives

1. Anecdotes & Statistics

In the case Angela Davis makes for prison abolition she recalls the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. In the video of Ref. 41 at time mark 42 min. she remarks:

There was a flurry of activity around Trayvon Martin. His name was in the news every day. There were demonstrations and all kinds of events, and then what happened? George Zimmerman was arrested. You remember? [long pause] And then all of the activity stopped. It all stopped. It came to a halt as if the arrest of a single person, a single perpetrator could reverse the centuries of racist violence inflicted on black people, Latino people, people of color.[41]

She uses this event to bolster her case for prison abolition. The incident and its media coverage can also be seen from another angle. Given that the news dished out by the media is almost exclusively anecdotal, is it surprising that the national attention for societal problems ends just as abruptly as the anecdotes themselves? The response “Oh, the infotainment industry! Sigh!” captures only part of the truth. At the root of this phenomenon is something more profound that reflects how the human brain is wired. Daniel Kahneman has made a career out of studying aspects of irrational human thought. Here is one of the examples he mentions:

*Scope neglect*— Complete or almost complete neglect of extension has often been observed in studies of the willingness to pay for public goods, where the effect is called “neglect of scope.” The best known example is a study by William H. Desvousges *et al.* (1993) in which respondents indicated their willingness to contribute money to prevent the drowning of migratory birds. The number of
birds that would be saved was varied for different sub-samples. The estimated amounts that households were willing to pay were $80, $78, and $88, to save 2,000, 20,000, or 200,000 birds, respectively. The target attribute in this case is willingness to pay (WTP), and the heuristic attribute appears to be the emotion associated with the image of a bird drowning in oil, or perhaps with the image of a bird being saved from drowning (Kahneman et al., 1999).

From this perspective, Trayvon Martin’s fate becomes a heuristic substitute for the problem of racism for which Zimmerman’s subsequent arrest is seen as the “solution.” Kahneman has discussed the same irrationality in the context of the difficulty to communicate the findings of science so as to impact political decisions.[42]

2. Rule of Laws of Physics

The limitations of our thinking need to be taken into account in Seeding of a Post-Capitalist Future, but even more so the laws of physics. David MacKay has written about the physics of alternatives to the hydrocarbon economy. The title of his book, Sustainable Energy — without the hot air, almost speaks for itself.[43]

Okay, so let’s put in some numbers. Let’s have our cars go at 60 miles per hour. Let’s say they do 30 miles per gallon. That’s the European average for new cars. Let’s say the productivity of biofuel plantations is 1,200 liters of biofuel per hectare per year. That’s true of European biofuels. And let’s imagine the cars are spaced 80 meters apart from each other, and they’re just perpetually going along this road. The length of the road doesn’t matter, because the longer the road, the more biofuel plantation we’ve got. What do we do with these numbers? Well, you take the first number, and you divide by the other three, and you get eight kilometers. And that’s the answer. That’s how wide the plantation would have to be, given these assumptions. And maybe that makes you say, “Hmm. Maybe this isn’t going to be quite so easy.”[44]

In this context another important player is James Hansen, who perhaps belongs in Section II A. Hansen testified about the dangers of climate change to congressional committees in the late 1980s. That testimony, which was rosier than subsequent developments, was to
a large extent consisted of predictions of climate models.[45] Last summer he and collaborators presented the results of their statistical analysis of what has actually happened in recent decades. Here is the full abstract of this breathtaking paper:

“Climate dice,” describing the chance of unusually warm or cool seasons, have become more and more “loaded” in the past 30 years, coincident with rapid global warming. The distribution of seasonal mean temperature anomalies has shifted toward higher temperatures and the range of anomalies has increased. An important change is the emergence of a category of summertime extremely hot outliers, more than three standard deviations (σ) warmer than the climatology of the 1951–1980 base period. This hot extreme, which covered much less than 1% of Earth’s surface during the base period, now typically covers about 10% of the land area. It follows that we can state, with a high degree of confidence, that extreme anomalies such as those in Texas and Oklahoma in 2011 and Moscow in 2010 were a consequence of global warming because their likelihood in the absence of global warming was exceedingly small. We discuss practical implications of this substantial, growing, climate change. [46]

III. TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Table I, to conclude, is a sample of what the schedule of Seeding a Post-Capitalist Future might look like. Obviously, like the rest of this proposal many variations are possible, and probably even desirable. I made up the titles to convey intent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.a</td>
<td>Naomi Klein</td>
<td>Capitalism and Climate Change</td>
<td>II A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.b</td>
<td>Chris Hedges</td>
<td>Sacrifice Zones</td>
<td>II A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.c</td>
<td>Andrew Bacevich</td>
<td>Perpetual War</td>
<td>II A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.a</td>
<td>Angela Davis</td>
<td>Prison Abolition</td>
<td>II B 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.b</td>
<td>Setsu Shigematsu</td>
<td>Visions of Abolition</td>
<td>II B 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.c</td>
<td>Michelle Alexander</td>
<td>The New Jim Crow</td>
<td>II B 5</td>
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<td>3.a</td>
<td>Gar Alperovitz</td>
<td>America Beyond Capitalism</td>
<td>II B 1</td>
</tr>
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<td>4.a</td>
<td>Janelle Cornwell</td>
<td>Community Economics</td>
<td>II B 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.a</td>
<td>John Buck / Jerry Koch-Gonzalez</td>
<td>Sociocracy</td>
<td>II B 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.a</td>
<td>Jaron Lanier</td>
<td>Society Run by Proprietary Data</td>
<td>IID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.a</td>
<td>Charles Eisenstein</td>
<td>Sacred Economics</td>
<td>IID 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.b</td>
<td>David Graeber</td>
<td>Debt and Beyond</td>
<td>IID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.a</td>
<td>Majora Carter</td>
<td>Greening the Ghetto</td>
<td>II B 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.b</td>
<td>David Suzuki</td>
<td>Community Gardens in Detroit</td>
<td>II B 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.a</td>
<td>Marina Sitrin</td>
<td>Horizontalism in Latin America</td>
<td>II C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.b</td>
<td>Vijay Prashad</td>
<td>Revolt of the Global Poor</td>
<td>II C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.a</td>
<td>Arundhati Roy</td>
<td>The Ravages of Capitalism in India</td>
<td>II C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.a</td>
<td>Daniel Kahneman</td>
<td>Statistics &amp; Anecdotes</td>
<td>II E 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.a</td>
<td>David MacKay</td>
<td>Sustainability and the Laws of Physics</td>
<td>II E 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.b</td>
<td>James Hansen</td>
<td>The Physics of Climate Change</td>
<td>II E 2</td>
</tr>
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</table>

TABLE I. Proposed tentative schedule. Numbers enumerate weeks and letters alternatives.


[38] Charles Eisenstein, Sacred Economics (Read Online, 2011).


