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Beyond Socialism: Solidarity

Two issues ago I promised to explore the difference between “social” and “socialist.” Since I’m advocating a social approach to addressing problems, I wondered whether that makes me a “socialist.” I have decided it does not. “Socialism”—at least as I think most people understand it—is focused on ownership. What I am excited about at the moment is much more than changing ownership—as huge a project as that is!

And here I’ll quote Gar Alperovitz, from a remarkable paper called “Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth: Introduction.”

“Changing ownership, by itself, is clearly not enough. Ownership is the major determinant of systemic outcomes, but real democracy—economic and political—requires attendant forms of transformed governance, institutional development, and cultural mobilization in order to be sustained. It also requires changing the underlying economic dynamic—away from expansion and growth as inevitable.”

Away, that is, from capitalism. For many years I believed (without really thinking about it) that to be “anti-capitalist” was to be “socialist.” But my vision has evolved beyond that simplistic equation, and now is closer to the vision that Alperovitz describes as a “trajectory and pattern for steadily developing democratized institutional change—one that moves beyond both corporate capitalism and traditional state socialism.”

Lots of people are thinking along these same lines. And the word that a lot of people use in this context is “Solidarity.” Last August I wrote about Universal Family Care, noting that this Social Insurance program institutionalizes Solidarity. But what *is* Solidarity? Well, it’s one of the four core values of Nygaard Notes (Solidarity, Democracy, Compassion, and Justice), but an exact definition is a bit hard to come by. I confess that I struggle to capture the essence of it when I try to write about it. For that reason I am currently researching the

idea with hopes of clarifying my (and hopefully your) understanding of the term. Stay tuned.

Aspects of Solidarity

In the meantime, here are a few glimpses of the meaning of the concept of Solidarity, a concept with which I predict we’ll all be much more familiar as we move into the post-capitalist future that isn’t as far away as many people seem to think.

Solidarity is “One for All and All for One.” It’s “we-ness” over “I-ness.” It is fellow-feeling. It is pitching in to help others whom you may not even know. It is “promoting the general welfare.” It is “We’re all better off when we’re all better off.” It is “We help each other.” Solidarity is born of the belief that each individual life is intertwined with the life of the groups of which each individual is a member.

A group of indigenous Australians in the 1970s came up with what is now a famous statement that captures an aspect of Solidarity and distinguishes it from service or sympathy. They said: “If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

The “magic of the market” is often invoked as the best way to motivate people to do good work. People work really hard, it is said, when the reward of a large profit is believed to await them. Arguing against this broadly-accepted idea back in 2013, I said: “Scientists doing research on life-saving drugs don’t need profit to motivate them, after all; they simply want to be allowed to make their contribution to public health. Transit workers don’t need profit to motivate them; they want to be a part of an efficient, friendly service network. And so it goes: Actors want to act, autoworkers want to make cars, teachers want to teach. All of us want to do meaningful work, and will gladly do it in exchange for some →→

Greetings,

At this time of Trump and viruses and Joe Biden and other discouraging news, Nygaard Notes will take a couple of issues to consider some good, if largely unreported, news. And I don't mean the sappy, feel-good stories about rescued puppies and so forth (although they do make me feel good). No, I'm talking about the growing global movement to build a new post-capitalist society! In this issue I talk mainly about the United States; in the next Notes we'll look a little more broadly—capitalism is, after all, the organizing concept that shapes the global economy.

There was a moment during the process of putting together this next couple of issues of Nygaard Notes when I felt nearly overwhelmed by the sheer volume and diversity of people and organizations actively working to bring about a new society. It is humbling indeed to spend weeks learning about the amazing creativity, resilience, and hard work of so many people around the world working on systemic change. It won't be easy. It won't be quick. But, to quote a group featured in this issue: "Another World is Possible. Another world is happening."

Thank you for whatever you are doing to help make a better world happen!

In Solidarity,
Nygaard

Solidarity from page 1

security and enough income to raise our kids and take care of ourselves."

I didn't use the word "solidarity" at the time, but that's what I was talking about. The capitalist market, in theory and in practice, is based on individuals competing with each other, which is sort of the opposite of solidarity.

The Center for Popular Economics in 2010 published a book called "Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and Planet." It's for sale online if you want to buy it. Here's an excerpt from the book blurb on the Lulu website, which I think very concisely captures the difference between an economy based on capitalist principles and an economy based on solidarity:

So many of us wish for something more—an economy we can feel a part of, not one that makes us feel like a disposable cog in a soulless machine. That something exists and it's called the Solidarity Economy. This kind of economy starts from entirely different premises than those of the ruling model of neoliberal capitalism which enshrines individualism, competition, materialism, accumulation, and the maximization of profits and growth. The solidarity economy by contrast seeks the well being of people and planet. It holds at its core these principles: solidarity, equity in all dimensions, sustainability, participatory democracy, and pluralism.

So, when I say that I'm not a socialist, I mean that I don't support old-fashioned state socialism as most people understand it. As we try to build support for a new vision for the post-capitalist economy, I think we would do well to avoid trying to "rehabilitate" the tired term "socialist" entirely. Let's start talking about Solidarity. ♦

"A Growing Global Movement"

Back in 2009, in Nygaard Notes Number 423, I published a piece called *Solidarity Economics, and More* in which I talked hopefully about beginning to see a "movement" forming with the aim of moving beyond capitalism to a more life-affirming socioeconomic system.

A "movement," I said, is "when a bunch of people not only get organized into groups, but begin to coordinate and support other groups who may be taking a different path, but are understood to be working toward a shared vision. A movement is big, it's diverse, it's powerful, and it gets stuff done." I said at the time that we hadn't really seen an "alternative economics movement." I think that

now we may be seeing such a movement taking shape, or at least we are seeing the development of conditions in which such a movement can grow.

There's lots of evidence to back up this optimistic statement. The rest of this issue of the Notes, and much of the next issue, will offer up some of the evidence. We'll start with a look at the Center for Popular Economics.

The CPE is a nonprofit collective of political economists based in Amherst, MA. For more than 40 years CPE has been providing tools for use by "people fighting" ↗↗↗

→→ for social and economic justice who are working to build a movement for social and economic justice.”

One of the tools they provide is a 36-page booklet called “Economics for the 99%.” Published in 2014, it’s a very easy and enlightening read, with chapters like “The Inequality Society: Why Are the 1% So Rich and Powerful?” and “How We Got Here: A Brief History of 20th Century Capitalism.”

Chapter 14 is the most relevant here, as it presents a vision of a Solidarity Economy. “There is an historic opening to create and push for a new framework for social

and economic development—one that puts people and planet before private profits and power. The solidarity economy is a growing global movement that is building such a world—through solidaristic, cooperative, and sustainable economic practices in production, distribution, exchange, consumption, and finance; through democratic, participatory ways of governance; and by joining with social movements to demand change for justice and sustainability.”

A “growing global movement,” they say. OK, then, let’s have a look at the New Economy Coalition. ♦

The New Economy Coalition

Movements are made up of coalitions, which makes me think of a group called the New Economy Coalition, or NEC.

When you visit the website of the NEC (www.neweconomy.net) the first thing you see is this: “Another World is Possible. Another world is happening.” That’s an important pair of statements. Watching the endless presidential campaign and the ferocious recoil of the political and corporate establishments from the rise of a socialist (!!) candidate, many people likely end up with the idea that another world is NOT possible. The evidence that it IS possible is found by stepping outside of the daily news cycle and looking around. Future possibilities are affirmed—indeed, are being created by—current actions.

Here’s how NEC puts it: “All around us, innovators are building cooperative, ethical, and community-rooted enterprises, reclaiming the commons, and democratizing and reorienting finance. We are finding new ways to share skills and goods, measure success, and meet growing human needs on a finite planet. At the same time, our growing mobilizations in the streets are building power to resist and replace unjust systems. Through all of these efforts, a movement is emerging that could change our society and the world.”

Don’t believe it? Have a look at the Coalition’s member list, made up of nearly 200 members based in 29 states and 5 Canadian provinces. You’ll find groups like Cooperation Jackson, People’s Action, Participatory Budgeting Project, Institute for Local Self Reliance, and the Highlander Center.

NEC explains that “The ‘new economy’ represents an emerging vision for a just, sustainable, and democratic future. Then they explain what they mean by “Justice”: “A new economy must work for all people, starting with those who have historically been marginalized and exploited by racism, imperialism, classism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression.”

And “Sustainability”: “A new economy supports regeneration of both human and natural systems. It builds community resilience by rooting wealth and power in place and in service of human needs on a finite planet.

And “Democracy”: “A new economy incorporates democratic principles into the management of economic and civic life.”

It’s exciting stuff. It’s possible. It’s happening. ♦

The Next System

I talk a lot about the Solidarity Economy, but there are other frameworks that have been proposed to help us think about the next system to come after the current capitalist system ceases to dominate our bodies and brains.

Speaking of the next system, there is actually a fascinating group calling itself “The Next System Project” that has a vision that they call a Pluralist Commonwealth. I like the way they talk about systemic solutions. Listen:

“The Next System Project is an initiative of The Democracy Collaborative aimed at bold thinking and action to address the systemic challenges the United States faces now and in coming decades. Deep crises of economic inequality, racial injustice and climate change—to name but three—are upon us, and systemic problems require systemic solutions. Working with a broad group of researchers, theorists and activists, we are using the best research, understanding and strategic thinking, on the one hand, and on-the-ground organizing and development experience, on the other, to promote visions, models and pathways that point to a ‘next system’ radically different in fundamental ways from the failed systems of the past and present and capable of delivering

superior social, economic and ecological outcomes.

“By approaching issues systemically, we believe we can move our degraded political conversation beyond current limits and catalyze a substantive debate about the next system and how we might go about its construction. Despite the scale of the difficulties, we are cautiously optimistic. There are real alternatives. Arising from the unforgiving logic of dead ends, the steadily building array of promising new proposals and practical experiments and institutions, together with an explosion of ideas and activism, offer a powerful basis for hope.”

Elsewhere in this issue I quote from a remarkable paper called “Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth: Introduction,” by Gar Alperovitz. He’s one of the co-chairs of The Next System Project, and if you read his paper I want you to notice the way he talks about the transition from the current system to the next. The transition is a hugely important subject that is too often under-emphasized in discussions I’ve seen and heard elsewhere. ♦

In the next Nygaard Notes: We dive more deeply into the idea of the Solidarity Economy.

“Quote” of the Week: “*An Unusual Form of Systemic Crisis*”

We have entered what is best understood as an unusual form of systemic crisis, not simply a political crisis. Which is to say the larger system of America’s form of corporate capitalism is in trouble, not simply its political system. Long, long trends of growing inequality, of poverty, of institutional racism, of ecological destruction—trends that do not bend in more than token ways to the politics of reform—these define problems that have their origins much deeper in the political-economic design of the system itself.

The author of that remarkable statement is Gar Alperovitz, from an essay entitled “Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth: Introduction”. <https://thenextsystem.org/principles-introduction>

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