

# The Paradox of Capitalism & Magnetic Anarchist Strategy

How do we live within capitalism, immersed in its institutions, and still fight against it?

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**1.** There is a paradox at the heart of the global capitalist power structure we live in. It is the result of two contradictory truths.

**2a.** The first truth is that capitalism is destroying our planet. Through global warming, extinction, impoverishment, racism, sexism, homophobia, propaganda, war, the burgeoning security state, computerized isolation, and more, it is literally killing us.

**2b.** The second truth is that we are dependent upon capitalism for our immediate survival. Whether through wages, pensions, or social services, our livelihood currently depends on income provided by the very system which is killing us.

**3a.** Most of us would like to avoid facing this paradox, and so, many of us delude ourselves into apathy, nihilism, or cynicism. We accept the system's offer of fantasy and mute our inherent knowledge of the deep wrongness that pervades the real world.

**3b.** Some braver souls among us face the first truth and do whatever we can to avoid complicity with the machinery of death and destruction. We may adopt an ethical diet, curb our consumption, or even attempt to live off the grid (to the extent this is possible within a global power structure whose tentacles reach into every corner of the Earth). Taken to its extreme, this is the route of escapism. Its goal is moral purity, flight from guilt, the individual satisfaction of knowing you're no longer part of the problem.

The failure of escapism is that avoiding responsibility for the problem also means avoiding responsibility for the solution. I can take comfort in my moral stance, but with or without my individual participation, capitalism rolls on, destroying billions of lives.

**3c.** A different group of us is more concerned with the second half of the paradox—the fact that we are trapped in this system as bad as it is. We may therefore conclude that the best we can do is to improve it or make it fairer. We may fight for policy changes through protests around single issues, lobbying or even run for office.

In its pure form, this is the route of reformism. The aim is to work within the system, influence the people in charge, and perhaps become one of them in time. The theory goes that once in a position of power, we would be able to steer the system in a new direction.

The failure of reformism is that it requires the abandonment of our ideals for actually overthrowing the system or creating a world without capitalism. There's nothing wrong with making life more livable within the system, but when we become part of the system, we betray ourselves and have already lost.

**4.** By themselves, neither of these two poles, escape or reform, offers us any hope of abolishing capitalism and saving our world. Yet, we must recognize that no way forward can exist without both elements. Rather than fleeing this paradox, if we embrace the absurdity of our situation, we can harness the energy of this contradiction to create

something new. Real revolution may be possible if we harness the imaginary magnetic field between contradictory political poles.

Rather than discarding either escape or reform due to its unique deficiencies, consider the vital energy that revolves around each. On one hand, the impetus to confront and make changes to the system can pull us away from individual moralism and toward meeting social and ecological needs. Conversely, the desire to escape the system's grasp can motivate us to create autonomous means of survival and reproduction not dependent on profit or foundation grants. We must both oppose capitalism and go beyond it.

How can we best orient our politics so as to gain momentum from these magnetic winds without becoming stuck in a static routine which never builds power? Can we be fueled by both escape and reform, while never becoming escapists or reformists?

5. A revolutionary anarchist politics requires a strategy to open up pathways for millions of ordinary people to mobilize and empower themselves. Undoubtedly this does not require everyone to do the same thing, but for each of us to pursue the endeavors which liberate our knowledge of the world, and of ourselves.

Everyone who reads this essay is probably already doing this—creating projects which uplift us in tangible if insufficient ways, whether gardening, organizing a single-issue campaign, or writing a blog. I am organizing with a new group called Strike Student Debt, attempting to build a mass movement of young people against the capitalist treadmill of education, student loan debt, and wage slavery.

What is missing from each of our efforts is the alternation of currents, or to use an older term, the circulation of struggles. It serves no one for us to specialize in one revolutionary niche and become entrenched experts of that stationary role. The movement depends upon the interplay of divergent forces, and most basically on the strengthening of relationships across difference.

How are we constantly challenging ourselves to learn new ways of making change? How are we socializing our projects so that they don't depend on our own individual efforts? How are we encountering those who view the world from a contradictory perspective, and actually embracing them into our lives?

And, like magnets, how are we building long-term momentum by alternately mobilizing both negative energy in the forms of anger and rage against the system which dominates us, and positive energy in the forms of communal reproduction and survival outside the system?

6. In practice, given how deflated social movements in this country have become, we must be realistic about the challenges facing such a two-directional strategy.

How do we fight the profit system to better provide for our survival and stop doing so much harm, for example, through universal health care, at the same time that we build communal reproductive structures that provide food, shelter, health care, child care, information, mental health support, etc., outside the logic of profit? All while selling our alienated labor to our day jobs to be able to just survive and keep our families intact?

Can we avoid the pitfalls of holier-than-thou posturing and accept that people have real and perceived needs that they can only meet through participation in the system?

Can we implement transformative justice practices to hold ourselves accountable for oppressive attitudes and behaviors without relying on the prison system?

Can we keep our revolutionary hearts aflame with hope for a liberated future when the system is so successful at ignoring and stifling our efforts, and even when our movements self-destruct from our own failings and cowardice?

I believe we can, and the idea of a self-reproducing, magnetic revolutionary strategy may help. If we continue to tinker with our practices so as to best align ourselves with the shifting social and ecological needs around us, it will ultimately bring us more energy than it asks in the forms of new relationships, new knowledge, and new self-confidence. If we can orient our movements such that they offer people outlets for true autonomy and self-realization, if they can discover themselves and a deeper humanity through involvement in struggle, then more and more people will be pulled into the process and real power can flow (horizontally, of course).

7. We live in a paradoxical world; the most important truths are the hardest to uncover, and the entire world is drowning in lies. How can we expect any easy, unipolar answers to our current quagmire? The simpler and more commodifiable an idea, the emptier it tends to be. Truth lives in complexity and contradiction.

To liberate the world and ourselves, we must be able to hold two opposites in our minds at the same time, recognizing that neither is sufficient and yet both are necessary.

For some reason, Latin Americans seem better equipped to handle paradox than we North Americans, who are preoccupied with chasing purity. The Zapatistas, who just celebrated their twentieth anniversary of dignity and struggle, understand paradox well: "Walking, we ask questions." "A world in which many worlds fit."

This essay was inspired by the Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario, who wrote these beautiful words which describe our predicament exactly:

"¡Si me lo quitas, me muero; si me lo dejas, me mata!"

(If you take it from me, I'll die; if you leave it with me, it will kill me.)

# fifth Estate

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