

# Imagining the Convivialist Enterprise

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There is no need to point out here that capitalism is leading the biosphere into an unsustainable trajectory in the mid-term (10 to 30 years). Greenhouse gas emissions have only temporarily stopped increasing 'thanks' to COVID-19, and rich countries have only slightly reduced their own emissions over the last 20 years by relocating their industrial production to Asia. Industrial animal husbandry and agriculture are destroying the soil and causing pandemics of zoonotic diseases. The concentration of wealth (26 individuals own as much as the poorest 4 billion) exacerbates the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a technophile elite who rely on innovation and science to achieve green growth. The health crisis, which has further reinforced digital capitalism and social inequality, only confirms these perspectives.

Concentration of wealth and ecological destruction have their roots in the same socio-economic system: the link between the large capitalist companies focused on shareholder value and the financial markets that impose their disciplinary power. The current troubles of Danone, a model of a *mission company* ("health through food") but one that has been forced by its shareholders to cut thousands of jobs to increase its operating margin to 20 percent, are a recent illustration. It is true that (1) many alternatives exist and are developing all over the world under the lead of a creative civil society. But (2) they have only a marginal effect on the trajectory of capitalism, and (3) their change of scale can only come from major institutional shifts that break with the fundamental laws of capitalism.

## 1. Eco-Solidary Alternatives: Effective and Dynamic but Marginal

Countless surveys show that the digital revolution, far from improving the quality and fulfilment of work, is being used to standardize tasks, control activity, and subordinate it to a *governance by numbers* in the service of finance. Faced with work that at best loses all meaning and at worst destroys the planet, a growing number of workers is becoming involved in experiments, sometimes on a large scale, that show how economic efficiency (the careful use of resources) can be reconciled with ecology and democracy. Small-scale farming and permaculture have a very small ecological footprint but make intensive use of labor and knowledge to achieve remarkable yields. Citizens' cooperatives are developing decentralized, human-scale renewable energy sources. Work collectives are taking over or creating industrial or service companies in the form of an SCIC (Société coopérative d'intérêt collectif) or SCOP (Société coopérative et participative),<sup>1</sup> which combine economic, ecological, and democratic goals. Employment cooperatives (Coopérative d'activité et d'emploi) bring together thousands of self-employed workers to offer them the protections of salaried employment and collaborative work opportunities. Participatory financing platforms are channeling public savings into eco-solidarity projects. Wikipedia's 20th anniversary is a reminder that the takeover of the Web by GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) is neither inevitable nor irreversible and that thousands of collaborative and open-source projects continue to flourish.

In fact, there are few areas—apart from the nuclear and arms industries—where eco-solidary alternatives have not proven their viability, even in today's hostile environment. Yet they still carry very little

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1 The SCIC, a cooperative society of collective interest, is a cooperative enterprise whose purpose is the production or supply of goods or services in the collective interest that also have social utility. A SCOP is a commercial company that differs from traditional companies in that employees hold a majority of the capital and have decision-making power.

weight: There is no point in celebrating the fact that the social and solidary economy accounts for 10 percent of GDP in France if it is mainly thanks to the large mutual banks and insurance companies and the agricultural or commercial cooperatives, whose behavior is hardly different from that of their profit-driven counterparts. At the current rate of growth of truly eco-solidary initiatives, it would take decades—which we do not have—for them to begin to have a significant impact on the overall trajectory of the system.

## 2. The Impossible Greening of Capitalism

In the meantime, the global economy is continuing its unsustainable trajectory as if nothing had happened. Despite the Paris Agreement, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions continued to grow by almost 2 percent year on year between 2017 and 2019, fell in 2020 only on account of COVID-19, and are about to shoot up again in the wake of a thoughtless recovery. As noted earlier, the low emissions reductions in OECD countries over the past 20 years are due to the relocation of industries to Asia.

It is true that large companies, under pressure from public opinion and seeking to attract young graduates, who are increasingly demanding an environmental quality to their work, are showing a desire, sometimes followed by action, to make their activity greener and reduce their carbon footprint. The agro-industry is developing organic products but with production methods that are just as damaging as industrial farming. Google, Facebook, and Apple are developing their own autonomous sources of renewable energy to power their gigantic data centers, but their very activity is based on planned obsolescence and excessive consumerism. Car manufacturers are aiming for 100 percent electricity, but battery production is an environmental disaster. 5G is slightly more energy efficient per megabyte transferred, but it could increase the amount of data channeled through the Web by a factor of ten.

It is clear that the emission reduction targets set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will not be met. The use

of geoengineering, which claims to remedy the consequences without addressing the causes, could progressively be imposed in the name of the need to avoid even worse catastrophes. Sequestration and storage of carbon, injection of sulfur aerosols into the atmosphere, seeding the oceans with billions of tons of iron... the sorcerer's apprentices of productivism have no shortage of ideas—or multinationals ready to implement them.

Capitalism is a system in which investment decisions are made by firms struggling for survival and therefore forced to maximize the return on those investments regardless of their concrete effects on the world. Competition forces the constant creation of new products and new needs, regardless of good and sometimes true intentions or even bold regulations. The *rebound effect* that wipes out the impact of clean technologies on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is intrinsically linked to the deep dynamics of capitalism. Moreover, the growing concentration of capital—one of Marx's few unchallenged predictions—leads to a concentration of political power in the hands of an oligarchy that is already showing us, even in France, how easily it is willing to restrict or eliminate political freedoms if its dominance is at stake.

Taking these ecological threats seriously, moving towards a convivialist society governed by freedom, equality, and fraternity not only between humans but also with all living beings, obliges us to think about other ways of making investment choices: not by state intervention, nor by suppressing markets—which obviously preceded and will survive capitalism and likewise remain an important condition of freedom—but by redesigning the governance of companies in order to restrict the objective of profit to a secondary and instrumental role.

### 3. Thinking of the Enterprise as a Productive Commons

To put it in one sentence, it is a question of placing the objective of *taking care*—of health, nature, and democracy—at the heart of decisions on what and how to produce. All the proposals on unconditional basic income and social protection, taxation, money and debt, regulation of

international trade, and so forth are meaningless if the logic of maximum profit continues to determine investment choices.

The state must of course develop and democratize public services (e.g., health, education, housing) and money (e.g., put central banks back under political control). But it is not its role to run all companies. Classical industrial democracy (known since the 1970s as *self-management*) is not adapted to today's challenges either, because it makes the workers alone the masters of their company's destiny; but, except in small and medium-sized companies, they are never the only ones affected by its activity. The appropriate model is that of the commons: All the stakeholders directly concerned by a production activity must be able to define together the aims and operating methods of this activity. Eco-solidary democracy should include long-term investors and employees in the process of governance, as well as public authorities, customers/users, local residents' associations, and environmental groups. The SCIC model is perfectly suited for these purposes.

It is therefore not a question of nationalization or state control but of socializing companies, that is to say, placing them under the control of collective deliberation by stakeholders. It is also a question of completely rethinking the modalities of the division and coordination of labor. Instead of the *command and control* characteristic of the capitalist company, we now have methods of organizing work in a non-hierarchical way, such as sociocracy or holacracy, which are based on a careful balance between overall coherence and the broad autonomy of work groups and individuals. Recent innovations in collaborative organization (popularized and sometimes abused under the term *liberated enterprise*) establish loops of reciprocal control between the various levels of organization in the company, which make it possible to think of and implement genuine participation by all in the decisions that concern them, even in large structures, without sacrificing efficiency in the pursuit of common goals. These goals, chosen by deliberation, will not be return on investment but rather a diversity of criteria linked to the social utility of the production and its impact on social cohesion and nature, both of which need to be taken care of.

Of course, this presupposes major institutional transformations as a result of the serious economic, ecological, and political crises we see before us. In the near future, less radical changes in the direction of socialization could be promoted, such as the institution of a right to co-determination of major investment and employment decisions and the inclusion of external stakeholders in deliberative bodies (e.g., boards of directors and/or employee representative bodies).

Establishing the enterprise as a productive commons also presupposes, of course, a rethinking of the ownership of the means of production, either by dissociating *usus*, *fructus*, and *abusus* (e.g., a shareholder will be able to receive dividends without having exclusive decision-making power) or by abolishing their lucrative ownership (e.g., by financing enterprises exclusively through credit, which is itself socialized). It is also important to decentralize the productive fabric (except for natural monopolies such as the railways or the electricity network) so as to restore a convivial dimension to work collectives.

Finally, the decisions of socialized companies must be incorporated into a more global framework of socio-ecological planning that ensures the macroeconomic degrowth, at the necessary pace, of energy and material consumption and the reduction of inequalities. The plan is not incompatible with markets, but only a plan can provide the framework to ensure that the limits of the planet are respected.

## Conclusion

The environmental movement, which was on the rise before the pandemic and will certainly take off again afterwards, is of course a major social force in the necessary transition. However, it has shown little interest in the forms of work and enterprise that would allow a real transition. It supports eco-solidary initiatives, universal income, and public regulations but does not make strong institutional proposals to free living labor from the grip of dead labor and allow it to take care of the world. It too often acts as if public regulation would be enough to force multinationals to be socially and environmentally responsible,

without touching the deep logic of capitalist accumulation. In France the recent convergence between the environmental movement and the trade union movement, notably in the collective *Plus jamais ça* (“Never Again”), which includes the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), *Solidaires*, the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU), the *Confédération paysanne*, *Attac*, *Greenpeace*, *Oxfam*, and many others, is an unprecedented opportunity to move forward on these issues and thus to remove an important obstacle to a radical social transformation as envisaged by convivialism: acceptance of capitalist economic rationality as the only possible global rationality.

