

# Can Capital Be Controlled?

April 1, 2000

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Is it possible to ameliorate the debilitating impact of globalization by forcing capital to become democratically accountable? Should we instead be aiming for the ABOLITION of capital? And if we favor the latter, how are we to project this concretely?

The protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle at the end of 1999 has brought us to a new stage of development. It wasn't just a protest against the WTO. It was a protest against what the WTO stands for—a world capitalist system based on vast income inequities, sweatshops, environmental destruction, and racial and sexual discrimination. The way thousands of workers, students, feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, and Third World activists came together to oppose globalization has raised questions like: What is the alternative to the WTO? Is it possible to go beyond global capitalism? And if so, what road must be taken to get there?

These questions, which arose from a practical struggle, are THEORETICAL questions. Theory was not external to the anti-WTO protest; it was present by virtue of its very depth. The question now is whether we will follow through from Seattle by developing the theoretical issues which are at stake.

This is already occurring, as seen in a host of post-Seattle discussions about how to project an alternative to the WTO and global capitalism.

One expression is the Winter 2000 issue of SYNTHESIS/REGENERATION: A MAGAZINE OF GREEN SOCIAL THOUGHT. An essay in it by David Korten, author of THE POST-COLONIAL WORLD: LIFE AFTER CAPITALISM, argues that in light of the Seattle protest the WTO should be dismantled and replaced by a new body that would limit the power of transnational corporations. Such a body, he says, could be a reinvigorated version of the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

A more radical proposal is put forward in the same journal by Joel Kovel. Unlike Korten, Kovel is not interested in reforming but in bringing down the world market system. He proposes getting to the “collective ownership of the means of production by the associated

producers” by replacing the WTO with a World People’s Trade Organization based on a federation of popular bodies organized worldwide.

What is interesting about this debate is that it raises the issue of whether capital can be controlled. Is it possible to ameliorate the debilitating impact of globalization by forcing capital to become democratically accountable? Should we instead be aiming for the ABOLITION of capital? And if we favor the latter, how are we to project this concretely?

### **WHAT IS CAPITAL?**

To grapple with these questions we first need to ask, what is capital? Capital is not simply a thing; it is rather a social relation mediated through the instrumentality of things. That is, capital is the expression of a specific social relation of labor. Capital is the congealment of abstract, undifferentiated labor. As Marx put it in his ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844, capital is the expression of “a special sort of work which is indifferent to its content, of complete being-for-self, of abstraction from all other being.” We experience this “special sort of work” each day, in that the labor we perform is indifferent to who and what we are as human beings. Capitalism reduces all concrete labor to its opposite-to abstract, undifferentiated labor.

It is often said that labor is the source of all value. But the SUBSTANCE of value is abstract labor. That is, only that which is the product of abstract labor has value in capitalism. Capital is a social relation of abstract labor. Capital is therefore not simply a thing, but a value-relation; it lives by obtaining ever more surplus value, or unpaid hours of labor, from the worker who produces it.

Marx wrote, “The aim of capital is not served merely by obtaining more ‘wealth’...but because it wants more VALUE, to command more objectified labor” (GRUNDRISSE, p. 353). Capital cannot persist without obtaining more unpaid hours of abstract labor from the worker; that is, unless it obtains more value. Capital is “value that is big with itself,” or self-expanding value. As the repository of surplus value, capital is driven to constantly go beyond itself, irrespective of natural or human-imposed limits. Herein lies the secret of capital’s enormous productivity as well as its destructiveness.

“Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it. Else it would cease to be capital-money as self-reproductive. If capital ever perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would have declined from exchange value to use

value...Capital is the constant movement to create more of the same” (GRUNDRISSE, p. 334).\*

For this reason any effort to control capital without uprooting the basis of value production is ultimately self-defeating. So long as value and surplus value persist, capital will strive to self-expand; any external boundaries established for it, whether by state intervention or regulation, can and will eventually be overcome.

This is the tragic lesson of the past century. Many socialists thought it was possible to control capital through the welfare state or government intervention. Such Social-Democratic experiments all ended in total failure. On the other hand, many revolutionary socialists thought that capital could be abolished through a centralized state plan and elimination of “market anarchy.” That too proved to be a total failure, as seen in the exploitative nature of the state-capitalist societies which arose in Russia, China, Cuba and elsewhere.

Why have so many focused on ways to either control capital or abolish it through external means, without getting to the elimination of value production? Why does the illusion persist that capital can be controlled, or even eliminated, without creating a totally new kind of labor which dispenses with value production?

### **BREAKING WITH COMMODITY FETISHISM**

The Archives of Marxist-Humanism contain a wealth of material which speaks to this. Raya Dunayevskaya addressed it during the miners’ general strike of 1949-50, when workers asked “what KIND of labor should human beings do?” She wrote, “Let us follow the value-form of the product of labor, as it appears in the market. The value-form has absorbed the content, labor itself. This labor is now seen...as it is ‘objectified’ in a product. Labor [has] been materialized into some object. [I]t is this transformation which predominates in the market where ‘things’ are exchanged. So that all the intellectual sees [is] not the form of labor, but the process of exchange” (“Presentation on Form and Plan” [1950], in THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION [RDC], 9260). Thus, even when the intellectual “knows” that social relations between people, not an exchange of things, is what is “really” going on, he easily falls for the illusion that relations in the market, instead of in production, are decisive.

The intellectual fails to grasp what workers know from their daily experience-namely, that the real problem is not what happens in the market, global or otherwise, but what happens

in production. But to get to the RESOLUTION of the problem the worker too must undergo a journey of discovery.

As Dunayevskaya put it, “The personification of things keeps the worker from realizing that the means of production are not just property, an object outside him, but they are the materialization of his own labor” (SUPPLEMENT TO RDC, 11934). “Just as ‘logic is the money of the mind,’ so the fetishism of commodities is the mind, the ideology, of capitalist society; an ideology that holds prisoner not only the capitalist and his intellectual representative, but also the worker. Only FREELY associated labor will be able to strip the fetishism from commodities” (SUPPLEMENT TO RDC, 11898).

Since capital is a value-relation which shows itself through a process of exchange, the social relations of labor which constitute it are concealed in the product. Hence, the very nature of capital as a value-relation is that it is bound to be misunderstood. To break through the fetishism which attaches itself to products of labor, cognition must rise to the level of the workers’ quest for FREELY associated labor. Only then will the illusion be stripped away that capital can be controlled.

This is not to suggest that there is anything wrong with focusing on the WTO and other institutions which play a key role in the exchange process of global capital. As Marx said in 1858, “The world market is [where] all contradictions come into play.” The more globalized capitalism becomes, the more its contradictions come to the surface. The problem is not in making the target of critique the WTO or the exchange process of capital. The problem rather comes in when the way to resolve or UPROOT the contradictions is thought to consist of changes in exchange relations. So what has to be changed to halt the destructive march of global capital? Marx addressed this when he wrote of the need to create a situation “where labor in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased” (GRUNDRISSE, p. 325).

Achieving this would truly be the foundation of a new society. For it would mean that instead of being treated as a thing, and therefore ultimately replaceable by one, labor would do what no machine can—namely, affirm the richness of human individuality, in all its diversity, contingency, and unpredictability, in the very act of laboring. The end of alienated labor heralds the end of capital itself.

### **SEATTLE IN THE HISTORIC MIRROR**

For Marx’s concept of a world “where labor in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased” to be more than a distant wish, an OUGHT that reality can as easily

ignore as acknowledge, requires that there be a subjective force immanent in the present which can realize it. Do such forces exist, and if so, what are they?

With this question in mind, let's return once more to the Seattle protest in light of the way thousands of workers marched alongside students, environmentalists, feminists, gays and lesbians and Third World activists against globalized capitalism.

The importance of this development can be appreciated if we view it in historic context. Toward the end of the 19th century, capitalism responded to incessant workers' revolts and economic crises by trying to buy off a section of labor. Capital ended up paying some workers higher wages-in exchange for forcing workers to surrender control over the labor process through an array of new forms of reorganizing the work process. Such moves were inseparable from a new stage of capitalist globalization-imperialism.

This led to a divide in labor. Whereas the Black dimension was at the forefront in opposing monopoly capitalism-imperialism, a section of the labor movement capitulated to it-as seen in the sellouts of the labor bureaucracy and the capitulation of part of the socialist movement to reformism.

In the aftermath of World War II, capital again responded to intense labor strife by paying workers higher wages-while exerting even more control over the labor process. It was part of the phenomenon known as Automation. This too was inseparable from a new stage of capitalist globalization, as the U.S. and Russia squared off in a struggle for world domination. It was reflected in the Marshall Plan and Warsaw Pact and neocolonialism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The unstated premise was that in exchange for getting a bigger piece of the pie, U.S. workers would allow capital to do as it pleased overseas. Yet this premise is now being openly challenged. The experience of Seattle indicates that a significant section of U.S. labor is breaking with the entire global strategy of capital.

In this sense, a new social consciousness arose out of Seattle. It's reflected in how the growing disdain for global capital is drawing many workers into solidarizing with those in the technologically underdeveloped world. This opens new doors in cognition as well as in action. For what connects a worker in the U.S. to one in Malaysia if not that they are increasingly subject to the same CONDITIONS of labor? Be their payment high or low, workers are opposing very similar working conditions. The new global labor solidarity contains potential for projecting anew the question "what kind of labor should human beings do."

### **A BEGINNING THAT HAS NOT YET BEGUN**

Crucial as these developments are, we still have a long way to go before we have a movement in hand to uproot global capitalism. As Marx never ceased to emphasize, socialism can only be created through the CONSCIOUS activity of masses of people. It cannot be brought in through the back door by a vanguard party or enlightened intellectuals. Masses of people will have to raise openly and work through the meaning of the new kind of society they wish to create, in order for it to become real.

A host of difficult questions confronts us on this. How to create a new kind of labor which breaks with the hierarchical division between mental and manual labor? How to create a new kind of labor which transcends the problems of racism and sexism, which long preceded capitalism? How to create a new kind of labor which is not machine-like while at the same time being able to meet the level of development and technology that humanity has grown so accustomed to, and which it will hardly be willing to forfeit?

These questions are far more serious and difficult than that of how to get rid of the personifications of capital—the capitalists and the bureaucrats. As we know from the history of post-Marx Marxism, leaving the question there solves nothing, and only allows a new form of capitalism, state-capitalism, to arise.

These questions cannot be answered without rooting thought in what comes from below—in the new social consciousness born from Seattle as well from other nodal points of revolt, from the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992 to the Chiapas rebellion of 1994-99. At the same time, thought must root itself in a BODY OF IDEAS whose content provides direction for answering the difficult questions associated with the abolition of capital. That body of thought is Marx's philosophy of "revolution in permanence" as restated for our era by Marxist-Humanism. The dialogue between these ideas and mass creativity may well turn out to be pivotal for the new century.

\* Capital's drive to overcome external limits does not free it from the limits which reside within capital itself. As Marx argued, "From the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets ideally beyond it, does not by any means follow that it has really overcome it...the universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers within its own nature" (GRUNDRISSE, p. 410). "The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as...the motive and purpose of production...and not the reverse, i.e., the means of production are not simply means for a steadily expanding pattern of life for the society of producers" (CAPITAL VOL. 3, p. 358).

## U.S. Marxist-Humanists

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Originally appeared in *News & Letters*, April 2000