A forum organized by The Commune and Marxist-Humanist Initiative was held in London on July 5, 2010. A talk by Anne Jaclard, “You Can’t Change the Mode of Production with a Political Agenda,” was followed, as it is below, by a talk by Andrew Kliman, “The Transformation of Capitalism into Communism in the Critique of the Gotha Program.”

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“You Can’t Change the Mode of Production with a Political Agenda”

by Anne Jaclard, National Secretary, Marxist-Humanist Initiative

Marxist-Humanist Initiative sees as a primary responsibility the theoretical development of “what must be changed in order to transcend capitalism,” and the engagement of workers, women, minorities, Leftists, and others in this work. We consider this to be vital theoretic preparation for revolution, so people are not first confronted with the question after the fall of capitalism, while it is waiting in the wings to rush back in.

But in this work, we are battling prevailing Left concepts about how to change society from capitalism to socialism, concepts which rely first and foremost on political change: typically, first you change people’s consciousness, then you seize power by overthrowing the state and corporations, then you vote in (or impose) new economic and personal codes of conduct, and proceed to set up methods to distribute resources and goods fairly, to plan what to produce, protect the environment, etc. We get this sort of scenario from everyone from vanguardists to anarchists.

In fact, as the process of achieving a socialist society is commonly discussed, it seems we only need the will to have one, and the political power to enforce our will. In this scenario, it is assumed that politics is in the driver’s seat, able to override all existing economic relations and bad human relations as well. The history of the many failed 20th century revolutions is rarely examined, other than by people with theories of state-capitalism, in terms of the revolutions’ failures to break out of the capitalist mode of production.

I argue that Marx’s philosophy entails a different anticipation of what is crucial to socialism. For Marx, capitalism’s laws drive politics, not the other way around, and those laws must be smashed completely in order to begin to build a new society. Only a change in the mode of production will enable a new society to emerge and to be sustainable. While a break with the operation of law of value will not automatically ensure that all aspects of society will be made anew, it is an essential part of the process. It can create the material and social basis for women, for example, to continue their struggles until their ideas of liberation are fully developed and realized.

Left sees politics as in command

On the Left today, even most Marxist economists have skipped over the issue of what constitutes breaking with capitalism. For example, Fred Moseley responded to the economic crisis by saying last year (in “The US Economic Crisis: Causes and Solutions” on line at...
that nationalizing the financial sector is “the only way” out of the crisis: “…finance should be nationalized and operated by the government in the interest of public policy objectives.” He goes on to predict that once finance is nationalized, it will open the door to “more worker-friendly options,” and concludes, “The nationalization of banks is not socialism, but it could be an important step on the road to socialism. The use of government banks to pursue important public policy objectives, rather than profit maximization, would be a model for the rest of the economy.”

Moseley doesn’t tell us how this would work. Aside from the fact that their current owners would resist nationalization, we must ask: can banks pursue public policy objectives? While we remain in capitalism, banks depend on investors, and investors want profits, not social engineering. So there is no basis for seeing this as a possible stepping stone to socialism. In fact, such popular approaches to making real change must fail. Thus, advocating them only leads to unrealistic expectations, promoting the idea that through political and social victories, we can incrementally improve capitalism until it can be turned into socialism by voting it in.

This attitude results in a lack of theoretic preparation for the day when the masses can actually abolish capitalism, and thus it dooms future revolutions to failure. I’m not only talking about prevailing “Marxist” views, or anarchist and spontaneist views that rely on the workers divining solutions to economic and social problems on the basis of cooperative labor forms. I’m especially talking about your average person who wants to see another world, but thinks it can come about, if at all, by voting it in, or doing away with bosses, or paying everyone the same amount, or whatever political, legal, and administrative measures they have been led to believe can accomplish the redistribution of power and wealth and can really make their lives better.

In short, this prevailing view parallels bourgeois thought in looking at social organization as a political issue determined by power and will, and fails to acknowledge the systemic nature of capitalism. Shallow thinking reinforces the 18th century view of revolution as simply the overthrow of the state. Overthrowing states today, when they are only the political superstructure of capital, is still considered by the some small Left parties like the traditional Communist Parties to automatically bring in socialism; usually there is an additional assumption that socialism can be brought in by a different state. Missing is the concept of uprooting one mode of production and developing another.

Let me look briefly at another current theorist who is better than many, Robin Hahnel, whose work with Michael Albert on “participatory economics” (called “Parecon”) is very important but cannot be said to solve all problems of breaking with capitalism by itself. In a November 2008 piece on the zcommunications website, “In Defense of Participatory Economics,” Hahnel addresses the issue: how do we get to the day when Parecon will be voted in by the majority of people? Hahnel has no illusions about the so-called communism of the Soviet Union or China, no overt vanguardism, no programmatic answers. But he rejects Marxism entirely, seeing no internal contradictions nor instability within capitalism that would present opportunities to overthrow it. So he looks only to political-social experiences within capitalism to change our attitudes and lead us to replace it with Parecon. He writes: “The transition to a participatory economy consists precisely of dispelling myths about capitalism’s supposed virtues, challenging any and all forms of exploitation, rejecting commercial values, and developing efficient democratic and cooperative behavior patterns…. ”
So we and the workers are to devote all our time to reform campaigns, and none to working out a revolutionary future. With Hahnel, a split persists between immediate activity designed to build solidarity, and the ultimate goal of socialism, in spite of his vision of Parecon. We simply don’t work theoretically on Parecon’s problems and implementation now. I don’t see how his plan for the immediate future differs from what the vanguardists call the need to change the masses’ consciousness, only Hahnel would accomplish it through having the workers engage in reformist struggles and cooperatives instead of joining “the party.”

Can his plan work on any level? One problem with it is: if everything depends on changing people’s capitalist attitudes of greed, competition, etc., and these attitudes have been created by capitalism, then they can’t be changed from within capitalism. Marx argues the reverse, that social being determines social consciousness, so that working people already have the ability to confront and transcend the reality of their economic/social lives. Our job is not to tell them there is another way to live, but to demonstrate theoretically that non-capitalist society is actually possible to achieve, to theorize how to break with the law of value from which all capitalist laws derive. Only then can the Left contribute to the revolutionary process something more than wishes and false expectations.

**Marx’s theory contrasted**

Marx made clear that the mode of production engenders human relations in all aspects of society, and society can be revolutionized only by change from within the sphere of production. Politics is not in command; an economic system is. So it seems that as Marxists, we should consider the first steps toward changing the world to be understanding the depth and process of such a system-changing upheaval as would be needed, and exposing simplistic views that are based solely or primarily on politics.

Although it is commonly said that Marx was a theorist of capitalism, not of socialism, the depth of his probing of capitalism and his occasional discussions of socialism show, even if often indirectly, what it would entail to create the opposite of capitalism. Marx battled Proudhonism and similar tendencies in the socialist movement throughout his life. He demonstrated that their proposals for getting rid of capitalism or the defects of capitalism, would not create a viable, sustainable new economic system, but rather would lead to a return to capitalism. He demonstrated over and over that the mode of distribution follows from the mode of production: distribution cannot act independently nor reverse cause and effect. We have only to look at Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program, his most explicit description of socialist society, to see him exposing, at every turn, the inadequacy of looking outside the mode of production for the path to socialism. (Andrew will be discussing aspects of the Critique that are generally ignored.)

What is needed in order to abolish the capitalistic system of value production? Some people imagine that if we decide to “produce for need, not for profit,” we have overcome value production. This is a superficial and inadequate conception of what value production entails and what is needed to end it. The crucial issue is what Raya Dunayevskaya singled out in her critique of the Stalinist revision of “Marxian Economics”: that value production is characterized by “minimum costs and maximum production.” (The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State-Capitalism, p. 87). Moreover, workers’ control of the planning process is not sufficient by itself to abrogate this law of value. The issue is not who is in control, but what is. As Dunayevskaya wrote in Marxism and Freedom (p. 136):
“… Marx, throughout CAPITAL, insists that either you have the self-activity of the workers, the plan of freely associated labor, or you have the hierarchic structure of relations in the factory and the despotic Plan [of capital]. There is no in-between.

“The only possibility of avoiding capitalist crises is the abrogation of the law of value. That is to say, planning must be done according to the needs of the productive system as a human system. A system where human needs are not governed by the necessity to pay the laborer at minimum and to extract the maximum abstract labor for the purpose of keeping the productive system, as far as possible, within the lawless laws of the world market, dominated by the law of value.”

Otherwise, society remains under the despotic plan of capital – even if workers’ faces rather than corporate managers’ faces serve as the new personifications of capital. A cooperative must still buy its inputs and sell its outputs on the world market, competing with every other producer of the same product. It cannot decide to pay much more nor to greatly change conditions of work to implement more humane ones, without putting itself out of business. As long as capitalism exists, the world market will exist, and thus the law of value will exist. In other words, what will exist is the need to compete effectively, to produce as much as possible as cheaply as possible. There cannot be socialism in one country, much less in a single cooperative or network of cooperatives. Even if the members of a cooperative or network of cooperatives are nominally their own bosses, it follows from the continued existence of the value relation that, as Marx put it in his discussion of the fetishism of the commodity, “the process of production has mastery over [human beings], instead of the opposite.” (Capital, Vol. I, Penguin/Vintage ed., p. 175)

Today, Marx’s view of what must be changed to have socialism is largely ignored, when he is not being misrepresented outright or said to be advocating Stalinist Russia or social-democratic Sweden. The pulls of Proudhonism and social democratic redistributionism are so powerful that nearly everyone tends to think capitalism’s horrors arise from unequal distribution rather than from production, which in turn leads them to believe that socialism can arise from redistribution, and politics can do the job.

By failing to grapple theoretically, now, with the difficult challenge of uprooting value production and working out how a non-capitalist mode of production could function, the prevalence of political-based ideas condemns us to repeat the last century’s failed and truncated revolutions-if such inadequate ideas can even to inspire the masses to revolution at all. I blame the theoretic failures of the Left, and not the masses’ “consciousness,” for the past 20 years of missed opportunities, ever since the end of Soviet-style state-capitalism masquerading as Communism. The non-Stalinist Left failed to present Marx’s concept of socialism as the alternative to capitalism and state-capitalism. Let us not miss the opportunity presented by the current economic crisis and recession to present Marx’s concepts now, and to build on them so as to offer hope for a socialist future.
Identifying ultimate goals seems to be the easiest part of articulating an alternative to capitalism. The more we move back in time, towards the day after the change in political power and what happens then, the more difficult the problems seem to be. Many on the Left engaged in, and still engage in, a lot of loose talk and loose thought about “transitional societies.” This has been done partly to whitewash state-capitalist despotism. But it has also been a hand-waving exercise. The wave of the hand distracts you from realizing that you haven’t received a reasoned explanation. Unfortunately, the problems of the future seem to be so difficult that the tendency to wave them away by invoking the notion of transition still remains strong.

Bertell Ollman and James Lawler and others—it’s a common myth—say that Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program (CGP) recognized the need for a transitional society that would precede the first, lower phase of communism. They ignore the fact that the CGP states-twice—that the first phase of communist society emerges from capitalist society—one is transformed into the other, directly. There is nothing in between, not in Marx’s statement.

The basis of the myth is Marx’s comment in the CGP that “Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” There’s no mention here of a transitional society. There is the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society into communist society, and a corresponding political transition period. But if you conflate “transformation” and “transition,” you turn Marx into a proponent of a transitional society. This reading of the CGP goes back to Lenin, who conflated the transformation and transition in The State and Revolution, writing that “the transition from capitalist society … to communist society is impossible without a ‘political transition period’ ….”

I have come to suspect that the very idea of “transitional society” is incoherent, and seems to stand in the way of thinking things through clearly. Hegel’s critique of the idea of gradualness in his book Science of Logic seems relevant here.

Hegel argues that we like to conceive of change as gradual in order to create a palpable image, “to make it possible almost to watch the disappearing with one’s eyes.” The change is thus supposedly reduced to the easily understood process of mere quantitative decay, withering away. Yet this image in fact explains nothing, since what requires explanation is the essential character of the change, which is not gradual quantitative decrease, but the “abstract transition of an existence into a negation of the existence.” Appeals to gradualness evade the need to explain this by assuming the problem away: “with the gradual disappearance of something, the non-being[,] or the other which takes its place[,] is likewise assumed to be [already] really there, but not yet observable, … not in the sense of being implicitly or ideally contained in the first something, but really there.”
It seems to me that people such as Ollman and Hillel Ticktin fall prey to this critique. Instead of theorizing the negation of existing capitalism, they assume that it withers away as a socialist economy takes its place.

The difference between the gradual withering away of the state envisioned by Marx and Engels, and the gradual withering away of capitalism during a transitional society, has to do with the difference between the political and the economic. Political domination is rooted in class antagonisms. Class antagonisms are in turn rooted in the existence of the division of society into classes. And the division of society into classes is rooted in the mode of production. So the withering away of the state is intelligible because it’s based on the revolutionary transformation of the mode of production upon which the existence of the state ultimately rests. Once the mode of production is transformed, society won’t be divided into classes; so, of course, there won’t be class antagonisms. And that eliminates the need for a state in the proper sense of the term.

So if we eliminate the basis on which the state rests, the capitalist mode or production, the state withers away. But what sense can we make of the notion that capitalism similarly withers away? Capitalism is a mode of production. What do we eliminate in order to cause a mode of production to wither away? The very idea of withering away seems unintelligible here.

The logic of capital is “omnivorous,” totalizing. Capitalism therefore cannot “become” a socialist society; it cannot gradually cease-to-be as the socialist society gradually comes-to-be. Is it not the case, then, that revolutionary transformation must be understood as something different from transition?

This does not mean that everything has to change all at once; I am not denying that some changes must be gradual. The issue, again, is that appeals to gradualness are hand-waving evasions of theoretic responsibility, the responsibility we have to explain the principles upon which, and processes by which, capitalism is transformed into its opposite.

Not Another “Labor Money” Scheme: Marx’s Lower Phase of Communism

Marx continually castigated Proudhonist and other proposals for monetary and distributional reform. Yet his *Critique of the Gotha Program* projects a lower phase of communism whose central feature appears to be yet another “labor money” scheme. Marx seems to be a middle-aged man throwing in the towel after having come up empty. He seems to be repeating the very proposal—focused on changing commodity relations in the sphere of exchange without changing relations of production—that he had repeatedly denounced when it was made by others. I do not think this is so, however. They were trying to institute equal exchange in a society dominated by the law of value, while Marx was theorizing a society in which that law has been abolished.

One of Marx’s clearest formulations of why this difference is all-important occurs in his book *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. He there discusses John Gray’s proposal: a national bank would accept and store stocks of the country’s commodities and, in return, issue certificates denominated in labor-time. A certificate that you did one day’s labor would entitle you to withdraw from the bank any commodities that took one day of labor to produce.

Gray made this proposal in 1831. Similar labor money proposals persist to this day, of course, and there are some actual “alternative currency schemes” like Ithaca Dollars and Brixton pounds.
If one thinks, as Marx did, that “labour-time is the intrinsic measure of value,” then it would seem that labor is in fact a natural alternative to money, a natural standard of value. As he wrote in his critique of Gray, “[W]hy use another extraneous standard as well?” Yet for Marx, this was a serious question that demanded an answer. But instead of answering it, Marx said, Gray “assumed that commodities could be directly compared with one another as products of social labour.” This is because he also assumed that “the labour-time contained in commodities is immediately social [or directly social] labour-time.”

If that were indeed the case, Marx replied, “it would indeed be impossible for a specific commodity, such as gold, to confront other commodities as the incarnation of universal labour and exchange-value would not be turned into price; but neither would use-value be turned into exchange-value and the product into a commodity, and thus the very basis of bourgeois production would be abolished.” But that isn’t what Gray had in mind. He had in mind a system in which “goods are … produced as commodities but not exchanged as commodities.”

Marx argues that commodity production without commodity exchange is unviable; if you have commodity production, commodity exchange is unavoidable. “On the basis of commodity production, labour becomes social labour only as a result of the universal alienation of individual kinds of labour.”

An hour of one’s work doesn’t directly “count” as an hour, but as more or less than an hour, or perhaps it doesn’t “count” as labor at all, because it isn’t directly social labor. And two commodities that took the same amount of time to produce can and do have different values (not only different prices). The amounts that the different commodities are actually worth, how much “social” labor they represent, is determined in the market.

For instance, if you work for 40 hours to produce a typewriter, tough noogies. There’s no market for it, so your 40 hours of labor are not “social” labor. If a Stakhanovite can dig three times as much coal as you can in an hour, then Russian for tough noogies. His hour of “individual” labor counts as three times as much “social” labor as yours. If you work hard and well, but you’re farming in China or India, where agricultural output per worker is less than 1 percent of the U.S. level-then Cantonese or Hindi for tough noogies.

But why can’t the state-run bank just declare that an actual hour of individual labor will count directly as an hour of social labor? And why can’t all commodities that took the same amount of labor to produce be declared equal? In other words, why can’t every commodity immediately count as money, or substitute for money? Marx’s answer was simple: “The dogma that a commodity is immediately money or that the particular labour of a private individual contained in it is immediately social labour, does not … become true because a bank believes in it and conducts its operations [accordingly]. On the contrary, bankruptcy would in such a case fulfill the function of practical criticism.”

Marx does not explain what he means by this, but some of the factors that would result in the bankruptcy of the state-run bank are fairly obvious:

1. The more advanced producers would create a black market unless the threat or actuality of state violence prevented them, and so the bank would be continually short of goods, including raw materials and machines. The backward, state-regulated sector would become ever-more backward.

2. If the black market were thwarted, the more advanced producers would leave the country and take their capital with them, unless they were prevented by violence or its threat.
3. If forced to remain inside the country, they might well produce as little as possible. They could get away with this, unless compelled to work hard at gunpoint, because the bank would have to recognize that an hour of their now less-productive work is equal to an hour of every else’s.

4. The system would create a disincentive to work, unless people were compelled to work hard at gunpoint, since the results of an hour’s work would no longer matter.

5. It would also lead to a serious inefficiencies and a decline in useful production. One reason this would occur is that all products of an hour’s labor would count equally, even if they were not wanted or needed. Another is that the more advanced producers would be less well rewarded and thus invest less in new production.

Marx concludes his critique of Gray by arguing that “labor money is a pseudo-economic term, which denotes the pious wish to get rid of money, and together with money to get rid of exchange-value, and with exchange-value to get rid of commodities, and with commodities to get rid of the bourgeois mode of production.” In other words, to do what those who advocate labor money really want done, one must go “all the way down,” and get rid not only of money, but also get rid of the whole system of value production.

**The Critique of the Gotha Program**

Let us now turn to the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. The Gotha Program called for “fair distribution” and the “equal right” to wealth. Marx repudiated the program, not because he disagreed with these goals, but because it sowed illusions about “what would be required to make [the program] real,” as Raya Dunayevskaya put it.

The core of Marx’s argument is his conception that a society’s notions of right, legal relations, and income distribution depend on and correspond to its mode of production. He comments, “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society.” And he asks, “Are economic relations regulated by legal conceptions, or do not, on the contrary, legal relations arise out of economic ones?” And he criticizes the Program for not “treating … society … as the basis of the … state,” but instead “[treat[ing]] the state … as an independent entity.” And responding to the Program’s call for “fair distribution,” Marx replied, “Do not the bourgeoisie assert that the present-day distribution is fair? And is it not, in fact, the only ‘fair’ distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production?” Don’t we in fact get back what we contribute-to capitalist society, measured in terms of its standards and requirements?

These general considerations should alert us to the fact that what may appear at first to be another labor money scheme rest on a conceptual foundation that’s entirely alien to them.

When Marx turns to the first phase of communist society, he envisions a sweeping revolutionary transformation of the relations of production, from the very start:

First, “individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion,” as in capitalist society, “but directly as a component part of total labor.” Thus the individual’s contribution to society is no longer assessed in terms of the number of products she produces or their value. Thus Marx notes, “the labor employed on the products [does not] appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them.” What the producer contributes to society is now, as he goes on to say, her “individual quantum of labor”—the actual amount of work she does.
Another consequence of the direct sociality of labor is that “the producers do not exchange their products.” He doesn’t mean that each individual will be self-sufficient, but that you won’t have to pay prices in order to get things, nor sell things or your own ability to work in order to buy things. The reason why there will be no exchange of products is not that it will be outlawed, but that the direct sociality of labor makes it unnecessary. Each individual’s work is a direct contribution to the society’s production. Thus the result of production, the product, is directly social as well. It doesn’t have to be valuable in the market, since there is no longer value.

Because the mode of production determines the mode of distribution, new relations of distribution arise on the basis of these new relations of production. “Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions [for social consumption and investment] have been made—exactly what [he] gives to it … The same amount of labor which [an individual] has given to society in one form, he receives back in another.” If you work for an hour, you’re entitled to the product of an hour of other people’s work. There’s an exchange, but it is directly an exchange of labor. The products don’t exchange.

What makes all this possible? Marx’s answer is extremely important. He says that the principle of equality and the actual social practice “are no longer at loggerheads.” In bourgeois society, all people are equal as a matter of principle, and equal values exchange in the market. But profound inequality is rampant nonetheless. So “principle and practice are … at loggerheads.”

Why isn’t this so in the new society? It’s not a matter of putting one’s labor money where one’s labor mouth is, being honest and pure, or being selfless instead of selfish. Instead, what’s involved is that the changed social conditions have eliminated the contradiction in existing society that compels principle and practice to be at loggerheads. The contradiction is this: “the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange exists only on the average and not in the individual case.”

In the new society, in contrast, “measurement is made with an equal standard, labor.” This implies that the equality of labors holds true in each individual case. This is the all-important difference between what Marx thinks will naturally take place in the first phase of communism and what the labor money schemes try to implement by decree or by agreement.

As Marx continually emphasized, although the law of value appears to be a law of equality, it is actually a law of inequality. It seems to be a law of equality because, if the same amount of labor is needed to produce two different products, and if exchange takes place in accordance with the law of value, then one unit of the first product will exchange for one unit of the second.

The catch is that, according to the law of value itself, what tends to exchange one-for-one are the products of equal amounts of social labor, but the individual’s labor is not directly social. It counts as social labor only if it measures up to the average. Only the average, or socially necessary, amount of labor needed to produce something counts as value-creating; any extra time that was spent to produce it has been wasted.

What the Proudhonists and utopians like Gray failed to recognize was that this is no infringement upon the law of value, but the way the law must operate. Some workers are more productive, others are less productive. Some work at more-skilled jobs, others at less-skilled jobs. And so on. Capitalism could not function at all efficiently if these unequal hours of labor counted as equal. More efficient labor must count as more labor, while less efficient labor must count as less labor. So the law
of value, understood as a law of equal exchange, refers only to the abstract average hour of labor. It does not hold in the concrete, individual case. The labor of all men and women is “equal,” but some is “more equal” than others.

Now in the Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx says that this, precisely this, is what will be different in communist society, from the very start. No one’s labor-hour will be “more equal” than another’s any longer. Because of this, and only because of it, there will be a new relation of distribution that corresponds to this new production relation: remuneration of people according to the actual amount of work they do.

Marx did not spell out what must be changed in order for directly social labor to be a sustainable reality. But one thing is certain. Just as the dogma that labor is directly social, and therefore equal, “does not become true because a bank believes in it and conducts its operations [accordingly],” it does not become true because the Central Committee of the Party or the federation of workers’ councils believes in it and conducts its operations accordingly. The equality of labors is not something one can impose by fiat, passing a law, or agreeing to count all labor equally.

Again, lasting changes in the political realm must be grounded in changes in the mode of production, not the reverse. If the economic relations are such that different labors aren’t actually equal, counting them as equal will be a principle at loggerheads with practice. For instance, if we “declare” that the labor of a surgeon and a nurse’s aide are equal, it is almost inevitable that a black market for surgical services will quickly emerge. Either that, or “we’ll” have to enforce the equality through military-state power that has no prospect of withering away.

So the issue is not whether we count different labors equally—politics is not in command, despite what Mao said—but whether the social relations are such that different labors actually count equally. The task is to work out what such social relations are, and what is required to make them real.

This is one of the most fundamental tasks we face today, I believe. It is a task for today, not the future, because the new society will quickly retrogress if labor is not directly social, if different labors aren’t really equal, at the very start. Capitalist relations will quickly be re-established. Either the new society will “go bankrupt,” as it were, by trying to put into practice something that remains only an abstract and unrealizable principle. Or, if there is no attempt to realize the principle immediately, the result will be that inequality, exploitation, and social antagonisms of every sort will increase over time, not diminish. They are the natural results of commodity relations, and they will be the natural results of a failure to get rid of commodity relations.

In other words, you can’t “transition” your way to something wholly different on the basis of good intentions, will, or political power. “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.” “[E]xisting society […] is the basis of the existing state”; the latter is not “an independent entity that possesses its own intellectual, ethical, and libertarian bases.”