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BUILDING AN "AMERICA BEYOND CAPITALISM"

Gar Alperovitz' Message for "Workplace Pioneers"; A GEO Dialogue on his new book

Gar Alperovitz is no stranger to the workplace democracy and solidarity economy movements. He was a keynote speaker at a recent East Coast Workplace Democracy Conference as well as for the alternative economy track of the Boston Social Forum in 2004. In both cases, he brought us good news, and a wealth of evidence-based hope, about the growth of a diverse emerging counter-economy which has begun to sink its roots into the American landscape.

His new book, *America Beyond Capitalism*, is a roadmap of these pioneering efforts ones that Gar sees as "likely to establish significant foundations for what could potentially become far-reaching change" But towards what? The book is not just replete with descriptive details of particular projects; it develops a robust vision of a new and much-improved economic and political system a - "Pluralist Commonwealth". With this vision, according to Gar, we can begin to weave together and strengthen our all-too-often disconnected energies.

In the late Spring, I talked with Gar about the Pluralist Commonwealth, what it might offer to worker co-op members, employee owners, and other workplace activists, and what he sees as our role(s) within this emerging new system. (introduction and interview by Len Krimerman)

GEO: Let's start off with a brief account of your Pluralist Commonwealth.

GAR: You can understand it as a 21st century populist vision, one that gives ordinary people the power and resources to shape their own economic life, and one that is being built - slowly but steadily - in all parts of the country and all sectors of the economy as the economic pain of the current model deepens. Its main features include:

*a. the widespread development of **community-based democracy**, using a variety of strategies to support local economies, nurture local civil society associations, and increase the powers and accountability of local governments;*

*b. **new ownership institutions** such as locally-anchored worker-owned and other community-benefiting firms, along with various public institutions, such as a federal Public Trust which would oversee investments on behalf of the citizenry, and expanded state and municipal arrangements similar to current public pension plans;*

*c. ultimately **transferring the major share of ownership of large-scale capital** from today's entrenched forms of elite and corporate ownership to the arrangements in (a) and (b); so that, among other things, these new arrangements could help support a reduction in the typical workweek, providing citizens with more free time, genuine individual liberty, and opportunities for democratic participation.*

*d. a fundamental reorganization over time of the national political system into **a regional and decentralized federation**, thus strengthening democracy, increasing liberty, and enabling the democratic management of ecological issues.*

GEO: How, then, do worker owners and other democratic economy activists fit into this new system? On several occasions, you've described us as "both pioneering and scouting the landscape of the future...they could well be the leading edge of something potentially much larger." But is this realistic? How can we grow an entirely new set of institutions - and at the same time keep our fragile enterprises alive? And can we - a tiny band of cooperatives, employee owned forms, intentional communities, local currencies, and the like - expect to reshape or displace the enormous political and corporate machines that now control both power and wealth?

GAR: As in all movements of historical change, moving forward will inevitably require developing a division of labor within our ranks. Some of us will need to concentrate primarily on building and maintaining the pioneering enterprises that supply goods and services. Others will need to assess and refine our invented enterprise models, adapting them to better address issues encountered along the way; e. g., how to raise external sources of capital without losing control; identifying fresh and important roles for labor unions; clarifying how to remain solvent when a generation of founders decides to retire en masse.

Yet a third cohort will have to take on the crucial tasks of political education and alliance building: reaching out to both the general public and to specific groups of potential stakeholders in the Pluralist Commonwealth vision. There are many allies out there, and the aim here is to build cross-sector bridges and a larger and more cohesive constituency. This is beginning to happen, but we need to discover how to do more of it and do it much more effectively.

GEO: So some of us will be minding the store, while others are figuring out how to build more and better stores, and still others are connecting with both the wider public and other particular organizations and constituencies with whom we can share common ground. Would an example of this third role be collaborating with the environmental justice movement to develop green and worker-owned businesses?

GAR: Yes, and there are many other examples. I've just helped construct a new web site devoted to cross-sectoral alliances, e. g., between not-for-profit organizations and support groups for economic democracy: www.Community-Wealth.org. In addition, citizen-run deliberative processes like community-wide study circles which bring people together from many parts of a community, and the participatory budget, in which civil society groups jointly decide how public revenues are dispersed and public wealth is controlled, provide other examples.

In my own view, however - as *America Beyond Capitalism* stresses - it is crucially important that these alliances address issues involved with the ownership of wealth and capital. It's not going to be enough to collaborate solely on building this or that joint project - the vast current inequalities in wealth ownership need to be confronted and drastically reduced. To do this, we will need to develop - invent - new sorts of public-benefiting and publicly accountable investment institutions, e.g., to safeguard pension plans, to ensure universal health coverage, etc. It is here that the experience of worker owners and other participatory economy pioneers could be especially useful, for such new public institutions will not automatically become stakeholder controlled.

GEO: Another concern I have is whether the gains made by our movement - which you report on so fully - will be reproduced and deepened by the next generation. Do you see us reaching young people; or, positively stated, how can we do a better job of this?

GAR: Good question; let me offer several responses to it. First of all, you and I both vividly recall the 1950s, by all accounts a "silent generation", as consumerist as any. Underneath that passive surface, though, the civil rights, feminist, and campus democracy movements were beginning to ferment. Young people, I think, can be trusted to rebel, to look for more just and democratic alternatives. To take action in this country and around the globe, we need to be ready to help meet their inescapable demands for a new and better world.

Secondly, most Americans - regardless of age - are today faced with a far more severe crisis than that of the '60s. At that point, our economic system, though inequitable, was still functioning in a viable manner. This is no longer the case: there are growing economic difficulties across the board. Job security is negligible, company pensions are disposable, health and education costs are skyrocketing. Young people, like the rest of us, will need to face this increasingly dire situation; they will be looking for precisely the sort of emerging and already working arrangements we have been pioneering. We need to make sure that what we have learned so far is available to them, so that they in turn can

build forward with us as they create their own institutions.

Last, there's an especially important role here for university educators. While many are progressive, very few are as yet organized around economic justice or workplace democracy issues and their increasing impact on students. Progressive educators, many of whom are now tenured or even department chairs, have the opportunity and resources to make good things happen. Many universities are already beginning to help community-based economic efforts. Progressives could help shape and expand these; they could create new courses focused on working alternatives to both corporate- and state-controlled economies; provide academic credit for internships in democratic workplaces; help university administrators understand the possibilities for useful public engagement, etc.

GEO: Any final thoughts for our readers, especially on how they can best utilize books like *America Beyond Capitalism*?

GAR: Given the severity of the established system's deepening economic crisis and the increasing scope and maturity of democratic alternatives, this is a critical time for both thought and action. Fundamental change is needed. Such change always begins with small groups - and often with groups which have self-consciously educated themselves for powerful action. Think of the labor and feminist movements and the Committees of Correspondence. We need to create a myriad of small groups reading, thinking, and discussing together, while supporting each other in the invention of a far more equitable and robustly democratic system.

There are many vehicles for this: community-wide study circles, action-oriented book clubs, the culture circles developed by Paolo Freire, etc. These groups should form both within and among worker owned and other democratic enterprises; in addition, they can help bring workplace activists together with many other citizen-led organizations working for peace, justice, and a sustainable society. The Pluralist Commonwealth developed in *America Beyond Capitalism* could be one of several longer range proposals such groups examine. My hope in writing the book was to contribute to the debate by outlining a clear alternative so that people would have something to grapple with and so that if they disagree with specific points, they can come up with an improved model.

Gar Alperovitz, author of America Beyond Capitalism, is Lionel R. Bauman Professor of Political-Economy, University of Maryland, College Park, and a Principal of its Democracy Collaborative. For more on his Pluralist Commonwealth, see his web site: www.americabeyondcapitalism.com.