
Nonviolent Strategy Against Capitalism *

BRIAN MARTIN

Challenges to capitalism via armed force or elections have repeatedly been tried and failed. It is time for systematic use of nonviolent action to challenge capitalism and build alternatives to it. A comprehensive nonviolent strategy involves nonviolent methods to move towards economic and social alternatives that do not rely on systems of violence.

Capitalism is responsible for an enormous level of death, suffering and wasted human potential, including everything from impoverishment of Third World peoples to boredom in factory jobs. There is certainly good cause to take action.

Of course, capitalism has positive sides, too, notably the capacity to harness human energy and ingenuity to improve material standards of living. It is important to recognise capitalism's strengths. To talk of challenging capitalism means seeking something even better and not assuming that it is the only or inevitable way to organise people's lives.

The question is, how should capitalism be challenged? Armed struggle has been tried, but there is not a single instance in which an advanced capitalist economy has been overthrown by armed force to create a better system. In some poor countries, liberation through armed struggle has brought benefits (and costs: this is a highly contentious topic), but there is no equivalent record in challenging developed capitalist states. Soviet conquests destroyed capitalism in Eastern Europe but the resulting state socialist societies were not an attractive alternative and eventually collapsed, with nonviolent action playing a major role (Randle 1991).

Nor has electoral politics had much success in challenging capitalism. Socialist parties have been elected to office but have adapted to capitalism rather than leading the way to a complete alternative (Boggs 1986).

Both armed struggle and electoral politics rely ultimately on force. Their aim is to capture state power and use it — including the power of the state to coerce — to transform the economy and society.

An alternative road is nonviolence. Today, large numbers of people work in various ways toward noncapitalist futures, including running cooperatives,

opposing harmful trade agreements, fostering local self-reliance and questioning consumerism. These initiatives are almost entirely nonviolent, often for pragmatic reasons. If movements in these and other areas can learn from each other and from collected wisdom about nonviolent struggle, then there is some hope of building alternatives to capitalism, or at least slowing its expansion into more facets of life.

A nonviolent movement against capitalism has to be participatory and not depend on a few commanders. Leaders must be able to be replaced should they be arrested, killed, discredited or coopted, as routinely happens in nonviolent campaigns. It would be a mistake to set up a central committee for anticapitalist struggle. That is characteristic of the unsuccessful military model.

A movement against capitalism is likely to be a long-term enterprise, requiring longer than the lifetime of most participants. This is an especially difficult challenge, since most activists are motivated by issues that seem immediately urgent, such as a war, an election, a proposed law or development, or an outrageous event. Highly visible mass movements gain momentum through bringing together large numbers of protesters, usually aided by media coverage. Mass campaigns are valuable, but so are quiet and patient efforts to build alternatives and change ways of thinking, involving discussions, personal behaviours, small meetings and local initiatives.

If a movement is long-term and can't rely on continued high visibility, then it had better be satisfying for participants. In short, the struggle should be rewarding — indeed, fun! Consumerism appeals to people's immediate wants. To challenge it, something is needed that is just as appealing in its own way, though more deeply satisfying.

*** This article is adapted from material in the book *Nonviolence Versus Capitalism* (Martin 2001).**

Alternatives to capitalism and strategies to achieve them are obviously huge topics. Here I touch on key themes developed in more detail elsewhere (Martin 1991), looking at the nature of capitalism, how nonviolence theory can be applied to it, alternatives to capitalism, and three areas for challenging capitalism: creating alternatives, challenging the violent foundation of capitalism, and promoting different belief systems.

The Nature of Capitalism

At the core of capitalism is private ownership of the means of production, including land, factories and knowledge. This is backed up, ultimately, by the coercive power of the state. Generally speaking, the system of ownership encourages individuals and groups to put special interests above general interests.

The problems with capitalism are familiar. Social inequality is fostered within and between societies: the tendency is for the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Work is unsatisfying, often dangerous, and workers are alienated from the product of their labour. On the other hand, people who cannot obtain work suffer poverty and boredom.

Consumers buy goods as substitute gratifications in place of satisfying work and community life. Selfishness is encouraged and cooperation discouraged. The profit motive encourages production and promotion of products with consequences harmful to human health and the environment, such as cigarettes, pesticides and greenhouse gases.

Capitalism meshes with other systems of power, including patriarchy, racism and militarism. Men use positions of economic power to maintain male domination. Dominant ethnic groups use economic power to maintain their domination. Military and police systems, needed to protect the system of private property, are also used for war and repression.

Capitalism also has strengths. It is important to recognise and acknowledge these. Portraying capitalism as the ultimate evil is not a sound basis for developing strategy.

Capitalist systems have repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to promote great increases in economic output, harnessing individual and social drives for improved living standards. Although capitalism is compatible with dictatorship — as in Nazi Germany and today's China — it also thrives in liberal societies in which certain civil liberties are maintained, at least for most people most of the time. Although many harmful and wasteful products are produced, capitalist markets

are responsive enough to produce and distribute many largely beneficial products, such as vegetables, bricks, beds and recorded music.

The term 'capitalism' can give the impression that capitalism is a yes-or-no proposition: either you have it or you don't, so the only alternative to acceptance of capitalist hegemony is total eradication through revolution (Gibson-Graham, 1996). In this way of thinking, reform is pointless. Actually, though, not all capitalisms are equally bad. Reforms do make a difference to people's lives.

The word 'capitalism' is convenient for describing a system of social relations, but we need to be careful not to think of capitalism as something alien, outside of human relations. 'Capitalism' is a label. The reality is people interacting in various ways on a daily basis. Changing the ways that people interact changes reality: what exists within the label 'capitalism' can vary quite a lot. The challenge for activists is to change the daily reality in a beneficial way.

Nonviolence Theory

Gene Sharp, in his classic book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), presents the consent theory of power, in which power is not a monolithic entity held by oppressors, but, rather, a relation between individuals and groups in which subjects, through consent or acquiescence, give power to rulers. Nonviolent action is a withdrawal of this consent. Noncooperation, for example a refusal to obey, disrupts the power relationship.

The consent theory of power is easiest to apply when oppressors are obvious and distinct, such as dictators, police and occupying troops, but doesn't work nearly so well in addressing systems of oppression where there are no obvious rulers or agents of repression. Capitalism is such a system: nearly everyone is implicated in the market, simply by buying and selling goods and services. If markets based on ownership of property are exploitative, then nearly everyone benefits at different points, though some benefit far more than others.

A key element in capitalism is the way people's labour power is turned into a commodity. Employees sell their labour power to employers in exchange for money. Yet, in everyday life, many people are employers in a small way, for example when they pay someone to take care of their children, transport their belongings or handle their legal affairs. Lots of people are in a contradictory situation, being both employees and employers in different contexts.

The complexities continue within workplaces, most of which are organised bureaucratically, namely with hierarchy and a division of labour. Workers in mid ranges of the hierarchy are subordinate to those above but have formal authority over those below. Such workers are both rulers and ruled.

Unlike dictatorship, capitalism is a system of distributed power, in which nearly everyone is a type of collaborator to some degree. It is far more difficult to challenge such a system by saying to people, 'withdraw consent'. Does this mean to disobey the boss? Does it mean to refuse to buy goods from a large corporation? Does it mean not to respect private property?

If nonviolent action is to be used to tackle capitalist oppression, then it needs to be built on an informed strategy, including a careful analysis of the foundations of capitalist power, a vision of an alternative and a plan for moving from the present situation towards the alternative. It also needs to include challenges to other systems of domination, especially those in symbiosis with capitalism, including the state, the military, bureaucracy and patriarchy.

Alternatives

Any challenge to capitalism needs to have some alternative in mind. Some key features worth considering are:

- Cooperation, rather than competition, is the foundation for activity.
- People with the greatest needs have priority in receiving goods and services.
- Satisfying work is available to everyone who wants it.
- Everyone is involved in designing and running the system, not just authorities or experts.
- The system is based on nonviolence. A nonviolent strategy against capitalism only makes sense if the means and ends are compatible.

Each one of these features is a challenge to the capitalist way of doing things, and in every case capitalism tries to achieve a goal through a means that is contradictory to it. For example, capitalism, being founded on competition between firms and between workers, appeals to people's worst impulses with the contradictory argument that pursuing self-interest serves the greater good.

One system with these five features is sarvodaya, a republic of village democracies based on self-reliance, in the Gandhian tradition (Kantowsky 1980). On the other hand, traditional socialist alternatives, including social democracy, rely on the state and thus are not based on nonviolence.

Full agreement on long-term alternatives may not be necessary for campaigning today, because people often can agree on tactics despite differing goals. If the tactics are compatible with the features above, they will help move towards a nonviolent economic future.

Creating Alternatives

Creating alternatives to capitalist practices is the most clear-cut approach to change. Creating alternatives obviously adheres to the requirement of incorporating the ends in the means. Possibilities include:

- Community exchange schemes, such as LETS (Local Employment and Trading System), which is a not-for-profit, cooperative information service to coordinate local exchange of goods and services.
- Local money systems, which greatly restrict the power of national governments and large corporations, especially major banks (Greco 2001). Local money helps make people aware of the social role of money, challenging the idea that it is a neutral exchange medium.
- Workers' control of production. When workers decide for themselves how to organise work, make decisions about products and markets and otherwise take control, this gives experience in an alternative to the normal hierarchical organisational structure (Hunnius et al. 1973). It provides a direct challenge to the market in labour power and to managerial prerogative.
- Community control. When people in neighbourhoods, suburbs and towns have a direct say in how things are organised, this gives experience in alternatives to normal practice. Roads, building regulations, power systems, emergency services, schools, health care and many other aspects of community life can potentially be controlled by the people who use them.
- Free distribution. Providing goods and services directly to those who need them, free or with a voluntary charge, is a dramatic alternative to the capitalist market. Providing free food to the homeless, such as by the group Food Not Bombs, is one example. Another is free software, produced by volunteers and made available to anyone who wants to use it.

In many cases, attempts to promote or maintain alternatives come under direct attack. Often this takes place through laws that, if broken, are enforced by police and courts. Civil disobedience then has a role to play.

Challenging the Violent Foundation of Capitalism

Underpinning capitalism is the state and its agents, the police and military. To undermine capitalism, the

potential of nonviolent action to oppose state violence needs to be directed at state support for property and other props for the capitalist system.

Examples of direct challenges to property are occupying buildings or land (Corr 1999) and civil disobedience against intellectual property. Strikes and boycotts are a direct challenge to owners and managers. Sometimes building an alternative is a direct challenge too. For example, LETS, free distribution, local money and local self-reliance are challenges to the market. Workers' control is a major challenge to owners and managers.

Undermining Beliefs in Capitalism

It is essential to undermine beliefs that capitalist ways of doing things are desirable, superior or inevitable. People in capitalist societies live their daily lives enmeshed in a web of beliefs and small acts that constantly recreate understandings of what is possible and desirable. When people purchase a meal, see and hear advertisements, wear brand clothes, aspire to ever more material possessions or mould themselves to compete in a market for employment slots, they are involved in behaviours and beliefs that reflect and reproduce a capitalist-dominated way of life.

Capitalism is sustained largely by support and acquiescence rather than force. When large numbers of people break the law, police and military enforcement can be futile or counterproductive. The fact is that most people go along with the system, even those who oppose it. The challenge is to develop a strategy that undermines beliefs in capitalism and creates momentum to bring about an ever-expanding challenge.

This is a very difficult challenge. Capitalism has shown a remarkable capacity to coopt its critics, for example in the use of the rhetoric of 'revolution' in advertising. Apple Computers has used the image of Gandhi spinning khadi as an advertising angle, turning Gandhi's opposition to western-style industrialism into a corporate pitch for an opposite direction.

Nevertheless, many people are quite disillusioned with the results of capitalist development. There are many points for ideological challenge:

- enormous inequalities in wealth and income (which conflict with ideas of fairness);
- alienating work (which conflicts with people's awareness of satisfying activities, often pursued in nonwork time);
- environmental impacts (which conflict with widely shared values);

- increased commodification, such as ownership of genetic information (which conflicts with traditional ideas of common heritage).

The labour, environmental and feminist movements have the capacity to undermine certain beliefs about capitalism, but they may also reinforce ideas underlying capitalism. This is especially true when movements seek reform. When the labour movement seeks higher pay and better conditions, when environmentalists seek cleaner technologies and restrictions on industry and when feminists seek equal opportunity for women to be corporate managers, core beliefs in private property and the market are not challenged. Therefore, a nonviolent challenge to capitalism may need to include some campaigns that confront or undermine these core beliefs. For example, challenging the expansion of copyright and patents can draw on the obvious contradiction that they are supposed to foster the production of new ideas by restricting their reproduction.

Conclusion

A nonviolence strategy against capitalism needs to be built on nonviolent analysis, nonviolent goals and nonviolent methods. The analysis of capitalism should be from a nonviolence perspective, with special attention to the violent foundations of the system. The ultimate goal is an alternative to capitalism in which there is no organised violence. The methods used to move towards the goal are the familiar techniques of nonviolent action.

Capitalism is not the only source of suffering in the world. There are other major systems of domination, including state repression, racism and patriarchy. Nonviolent action can be and has been used against these systems, probably more effectively so far than against capitalism. Nonviolence is thus a multipurpose approach to social change. It does not set aside certain problems until 'after the revolution' — a common approach among old-style socialists. For many activists, other problems are more pressing or useful targets than capitalism. Nonviolent anticapitalist struggle should not take automatic precedence over other struggles, but instead should be one struggle among many.

One of the greatest challenges for activists is to live in a society, fully aware of its shortcomings, while keeping alive the vision of a radical alternative, and maintaining enthusiasm for actions that may seem to move only the slightest distance towards that alternative. Reforms are more achievable than revolutionary transformation and offer concrete evidence that change is possible.

No one knows for sure how to go about replacing capitalism with a better system. There are many possible ways to proceed, and not enough assessment of what works and what doesn't. It is almost certain to be a very long-term process. Therefore it makes sense to learn as much as possible about how best to go about it. There is a need for experimentation, innovation and evaluation. There is a lot to be done. With participatory approaches, there should be a lot of people to do it.

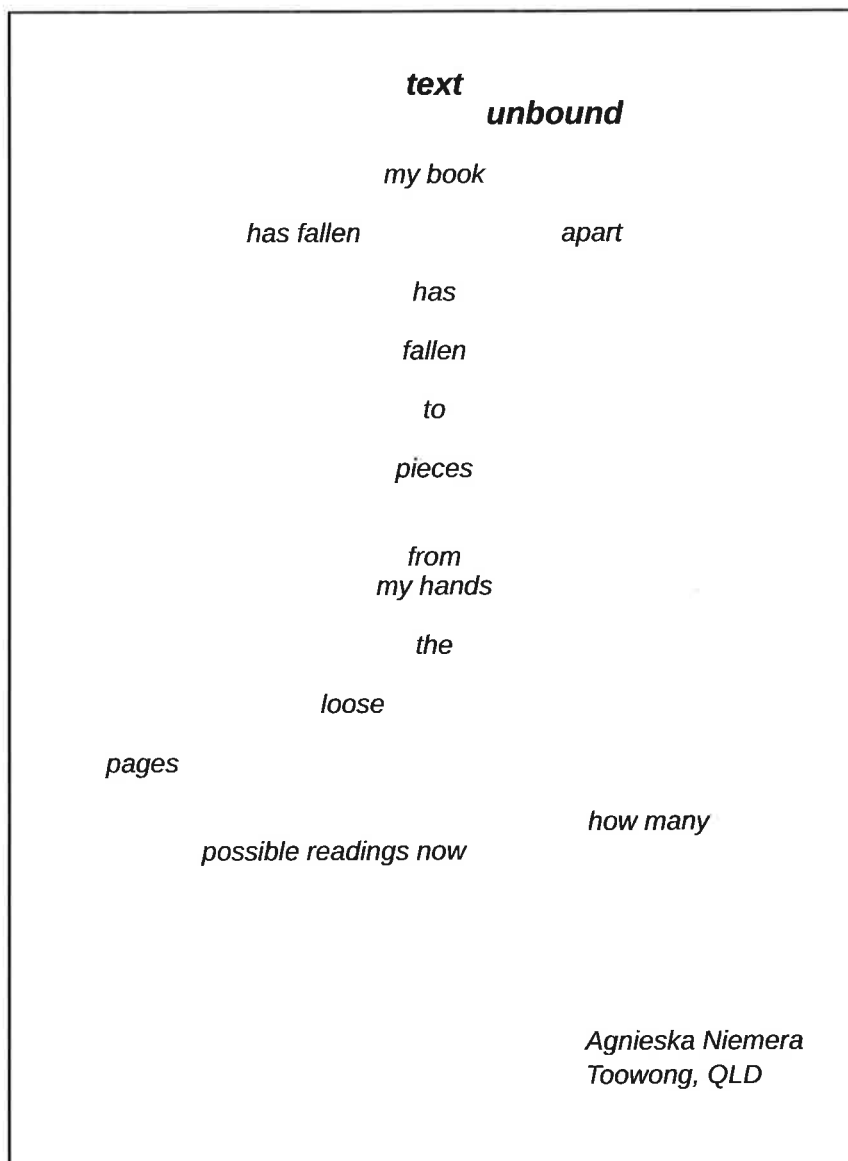
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Author

Brian Martin is Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong and author of many books and articles about nonviolence and other topics.



Agnieszka Niemera
Toowong, QLD