



# IMAGINE

“... a system that is democratic and equitable, organized and carried out to fulfill human needs in ways that regenerate and maintain a healthy biosphere.”

— Fred Magdoff & Chris Williams, *Creating an Ecological Society: toward a revolutionary transformation*

Welcome to Issue 5 of Imagine, an occasional pamphlet devoted to envisioning what a better world could be like and ways we can make it real. If we cannot imagine a better world, no path will take us there. This vision is a work in progress — we welcome your ideas for consideration and discussion (email is below). Future issues of Imagine will continue to expand on the vision and contemplate making it happen.

## Where We Are

In Issue 1, we drew attention to the urgent need for change, highlighting how the Covid-19 pandemic can be thought of as a portal through which we can see and pass to a better future. Our aim, as we begin this journey, is to help people of good will who want to create a better life to understand the depth and magnitude of change it will take to achieve it.

In Issue 2, we focused on some specific pathologies of our current society: inability to cooperate, misguided priorities, magical and sloppy thinking. We could look at these as a failure to achieve democracy, in any meaningful sense of the word.

Issue 3 took a brief but important digression into critiquing our adversarial relationship with wild nature and our desire to “own” and dominate our environment. Although we did not think to point this out at the time, this adversarial relationship with the non-human world clearly reflects the adversarial relationship with each other that our society imposes! We pointed out some ways each of us could improve our relationship to our immediate sur-

roundings. We hasten to point out that individual change will not be enough – a determined collective struggle will be necessary; nonetheless, personal transformation and individual action is part of that struggle, and small joys and victories give us strength for the larger battles.

Issue 4 focused on our values. Our current society values wage labor and profit, leading to a death spiral of commodification and exploitation. Instead, let us value the freedom to determine collectively how we spend our lives together. The necessary work to make that freedom possible is the care we give to ourselves, to each other, and to the natural world as a whole.

Our personal lives, our culture, our economy, our political institutions, and our relationship to nature as a whole are all connected, and many aspects of these are currently deeply flawed. We cannot achieve a flourishing world without fundamentally new institutions.

# Paths Forward

We see three goals before us in this and upcoming issues of *Imagine*.

1. To convince you of the urgent and incontrovertible necessity of a revolutionary transformation that transcends and fully replaces capitalism – or at least to get you thinking about the question of systemic change and exploring it beyond these short pages. This necessity is implicit in our previous discussion, but we will now make precise and explicit the reasons that lasting improvement in our lives cannot be achieved by only making reforms within a capitalist system of political economy.
2. To conceive of institutions that will effectively implement the values to which we aspire, and devise means by which these institutions can be established and allowed to evolve.
3. To strategize how to overcome the resistance of those clinging to power and privilege, who will certainly resist us with great ferocity.

Considering the first goal, let's start with defining what we mean by *capitalism* and by *revolutionary*. To explain capitalism, we must define capital. Following Karl Marx's definitive insight, capital is wealth in the process of increasing itself. The capitalist seeks to profit by employing labor to produce commodities for sale. Workers provide their labor for the cost it takes to maintain themselves and their families at some socially acceptable standard, and the business owner profits from the surplus labor they can provide beyond what is required to produce that standard of living. After perhaps consuming some of the profit for their own needs and desires, the capitalist owner invests the remainder in new productive capacity in order to accumulate still more capital.

Capitalism is an economic system in which decisions about production are made predominantly by capitalists with the goal of maximizing profit.

We will see that the perpetual growth of capital is intrinsic to the nature of capitalism, and that this growth undermines the promise of progress and freedom that capitalism itself lays before us. The definition of capital is a crucial point; in particular, it is important to understand that a capitalist business does *not* mean a business from which the owners simply make a living from the work they put into it. They are not seeking to accumulate increasing stocks of wealth and power. Independent businesses such as local restaurants, pharmacies, and book shops often provide valued services to the community and can be important assets for the future.

By a revolutionary transformation we mean a fundamental change in the nature of the economic and political system: its relations of ownership, production, and distribution, its processes for participation in social decisions about how we live, and most importantly, its inherent purpose and conception of value. After such a transformation, decisions about production would not be made by capitalists with the goal of maximizing the accumulation of capital; capital, as defined above, would no longer even exist. Instead we would develop institutions that allow us to make these decisions democratically and in keeping with our values.

Revolution does not need to entail recourse to violence, nor does it need to entail a sudden rupture unpreceded by preparatory incremental change. In fact, we think both these approaches are fatally counterproductive. We will explore possible paths to revolutionary transformation in future issues; for now, please recognize that we imply nothing about the means of achieving such a transformation, only that it must change the essential systemic nature of society.

Goals 2) and 3) immediately follow from our argument for the necessity of revolutionary transformation.

*Some of the homes that have been built in the last 10 years just appall me. Why do humans need huge homes? I was born poor and I didn't know you bought clothes at anything but the Goodwill until I went to college. Some of our mentality about what it means to have a good life is, I think, not going to help us in the next 50 years. We have to think through how to choose a meaningful life where we're helping one another in ways that really help the Earth.*

— Elinor Ostrom  
Nobel laureate in Economics, 2009

To begin addressing goal one, we ask some pointed questions:

- Can capitalism, in any variant, provide us the freedom to live fulfilling lives grounded in our own desires and commitments?
- Can capitalism continue to increase our material standard of living in a way that supports our quality of life?
- Does capitalism allow for the permanent preservation of ecological and geological integrity and a healthy (that is, minimally toxic) environment for human and non-human life? In particular, does it allow us to restore a stable and livable climate and a chemical balance in the oceans conducive to plankton, coral, fish, and marine mammals? Does it allow us to maintain biodiversity and stop the sixth great mass extinction of life on earth?

- Can capitalism create a world characterized by beauty rather than ugliness?

These questions arise from our aspirations in our everyday lives within our current existing society. Let us begin with the first.

**Can capitalism, in any variant, provide us the freedom to live fulfilling lives grounded in our own desires and commitments?**

Consider a thought experiment adapted from Martin Hägglund's book [This Life](#). A village with a water source five miles away requires the people to spend several hours every day walking to get water. One day, someone gets the idea to dig a well in the village. The villagers work together to dig a successful well. Everyone benefits because they are able to obtain water and have available free time to spend as they wish. In non-capitalist societies people are able to work together in this way because they hold many resources, such as land and water sources, in common ownership (the commons!) and share their use. As Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking work shows, people have developed principles and practices that allow sustainable management of common resources.

Indeed, it is capitalism that leads to the exhaustion of resources, at an accelerating pace. Let us consider the same village under a capitalist model, in which the water source five miles away is privately owned. The owner of the well hires workers to deliver water to the village. The workers can deliver water for the whole village, not just themselves, so the other villagers need employment to pay for the water. A local builder hires them to expand the well-owner's home. Then a villager discovers groundwater on his property and digs a well, from which water can be delivered much more quickly, with many fewer workers. Of course getting water for less work is desirable, but now there is an unemployment crisis! Fortunately (or so it seems) the original well owner, now with a greatly diminished water business, gets the idea of hiring workers to cut down the

forest and build mansions for the increasingly wealthy local capitalists. Because of demand for their skilled labor, the woodsmen and carpenters can demand higher wages and enlarge their own homes as well. Unfortunately, the game the villagers used to hunt and the edible plants they used to forage are no longer available, so they need to buy food from wealthy farmers who have purchased land from workers who no longer have the time to farm it. To purchase this food they will compete for more work, driving wages back down. In addition, the original builder, facing competition, introduces labor-saving machines, putting many employees out of work. Another unemployment crisis results, which is also a problem for the capitalists, who need paying customers. A new enterprise must be found to hire the unemployed (but not all of them, since that might drive up wages and reduce profits).

Certainly the capitalists increase their wealth in this system, and some of the workers do, too, but now the vast majority of people need to work for the capitalists to obtain their basic necessities, thereby losing the freedom to use their time for other purposes. Per-

haps the villagers would have preferred to use stone for building, preserving the forest, but the capitalist found this method to be more labor intensive and hence less profitable. Perhaps they considered their homes to be fine as they were and would have preferred to spend their time playing music, mastering bread baking, or walking in the woods; the better-paid workers only bought the larger homes as a consolation because they had no time for these other pleasures. Freedom to choose products or services is not the same as freedom to decide what to produce and what activities to pursue. Without the freedom to make our society's economic decisions, along with resources for everyone to participate in creating fulfilling lives for each other, there is no real democracy.

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We've always been told that technology would lead to less work and more free time. In the past 50 years, the amount that one worker can produce has more than doubled and yet the average worker works as many hours, if not more. Why is this so? We will come back to this.

*Normally, when you challenge the conventional wisdom – that the current economic and political system is the only possible one – the first reaction you are likely to get is a demand for a detailed architectural blueprint of how an alternative system would work, down to the nature of its financial instruments, energy supplies, and policies of sewer maintenance. Next, you are likely to be asked for a detailed program of how this system will be brought into existence. Historically, this is ridiculous. When has social change ever happened according to someone's blueprint. It's not as if a small circle of visionaries in Renaissance Florence conceived of something they called "capitalism," figured out the details of how the stock exchange and factories would someday work, and then put in place a program to bring their visions into reality. In fact, the idea is so absurd we might well ask ourselves how it ever occurred to us to imagine this is how change happens to begin.*

— David Graeber