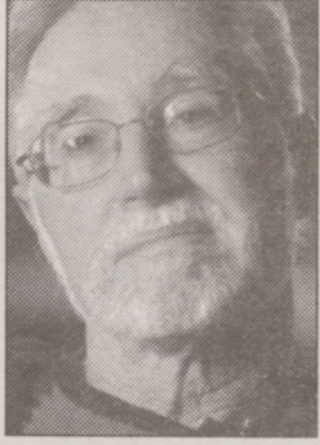


Radicals and Reformers: Part II: System Change

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Replacing the economics of competition and greed with the economics of equitable cooperation is the only way to achieve full economic justice and democracy and adequately protect the natural environment. Therefore, to forswear economic "system change" is equivalent to saying one is willing to accept some economic injustice, some lack of economic self-management, and some environmental degradation. Moreover, if the current system is left in place it also condemns those fighting for progressive reforms to always swim upstream, against the current, and any reforms that are won are always at risk of roll back. Or at least, that is how we radicals see things.

We radicals also understand that reformers are sensitive to flaws in capitalism — which sometimes leaves us puzzled. Why should others who see the same problems we do be averse to thoughtful discussions about better alternatives? Unfortunately, what radicals often hear from reformers instead are hysterical denunciations of those who call for system change. Perhaps we can begin the search for a way to avoid this familiar, destructive dynamic by focusing on what we agree on.

Radicals and reformers agree that the system is not serving the public interest in some important regard. Whether it be that we need more jobs and deserve higher pay, or we need to stop predatory lenders from foreclosing on our homes, or we need to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, radicals and reformers both find the status quo unacceptable, and believe something can, and should be done about it.

So why can't radicals and reformers sign a pact that says: We pledge to work to solve problem X by whatever means prove most effective and necessary. Let the ensuing campaign and struggle determine where that takes us, and specifically, let results determine whether or not system change proves necessary.

If radicals and reformers agreed to such a pact, and then rolled up our sleeves and worked together, there are four possible outcomes: (1) The campaign would be successful and the problem would be solved without need for major system change. In which case reformers would feel vindicated, and at least this old radical would accept defeat joyously and move on to the next campaign, convinced that it might turn out differently next time. (2) The system would prevent the problem from being solved to anyone's satisfaction. In which case radicals would feel vindicated and urge all determined to solve the problem to join the struggle for system change. (3) The campaign would have limited success leaving many unsatisfied and discouraged. In this case many would drift back into apathy, a few would try to resurrect a more effective reform campaign, and a few would proceed to fight for system change. (4) The

campaign would achieve truly gratifying results, but in so doing would also whet the appetites of some involved for more than proved possible to achieve within the system. In this case, some would rest content on their laurels, while others would move on to fight for system change.

Too often reform leaders insist that the moment a struggle is engaged that everyone must agree that only the first outcome is possible — that problem X can, and must be solved without resort to system change. When reform leaders do this they put valuable radical allies in an untenable position. We must either: (a) bite our tongues and not tell people we believe outcomes 2, 3, or 4 are quite possible; (b) abandon the campaign to avoid creating dissension; or (c) make a scene standing up for our right to express our beliefs like everyone else, and thereby alienate ordinary folk who did not become involved to hear radicals and reformers squabbling over system change.

When reform leaders insist that radicals repudiate their beliefs they weaken the reform movement unnecessarily. The movement either loses dedication and experienced radicals who often contribute far beyond their numbers, or suffers from excessive squabbling over an issue that is not central to the campaign. Because it is not the primary concern of most participants in reform campaigns, discussions of system change should be relegated to a secondary status where it need not become disruptive — especially if all acknowledge that the proof will emerge in the pudding. But when reform leaders appoint themselves guardians over what people are permitted to hear and make talk of "system change" taboo, they risk turning what could have been an informative and respectful discussion into a divisive Donnybrook.

Labor leaders who not only defended capitalism themselves, but sought to silence radicals who argued that socialism serves workers' interests better, weakened the US labor movement repeatedly over its long history. Reformers today who gavel single payer advocates out of order only undermine efforts to achieve health care reform. Environmental NGOs who denounce climate justice activists for calling for system change lower the odds of reducing greenhouse gas emissions before it is too late. And when militant actions respect human rights and do not hijack other activities, tactical diversity can increase the power of lobbying, emailing, and peaceful marching under permits. Consequently, there is no call for reform leaders to echo mainstream media denunciations of those who engage in more militant tactics.

So why do reform leaders feel compelled to denounce radical allies when this weakens the cause? Admittedly, some

reform leaders care more about defending the system than winning a reform. But often reform leaders denounce radicals because they fear their presence will repel ordinary people who are unreceptive to calls for radical change and militant tactics. If radicals and reformers are to work more effectively together this issue needs to be addressed head on.

Radicals have a fancy concept we called "ideological hegemony" which should help us understand the dilemma. Part of what glues any social system together is a widespread belief that the system is good, or at least necessary. If most workers did not believe they needed smart, hard-charging bosses to tell them what to do, and force them to do it, if most consumers did not believe the only alternative to markets is command planning, capitalism would be on shaky ground. But this means that raising the issue of system change necessarily challenges core beliefs that are pounded into all of us every day. Radicals need to remember that challenging people's fundamental beliefs is a complicated, often delicate process. Radicals who approach this task with a sledge hammer alienate everyone and undermine their own cause as well.

On the other hand, it is not only radicals who need people's belief systems to change. Unless those joining a reform movement come to believe ordinary people can be right and ruling elites wrong, unless they come to believe people like themselves can fight city hall and win, the reform movement will fail. Since ruling elites seldom respond to moral suasion, what successful reform movements require is a strategy that builds people's confidence in their own power. This means changing belief systems is the fundamental business of reformers and radicals alike. Reform leaders may avoid shocking people by parroting ruling class ideology, but they reinforce myths designed to immobilize people when they do so.

It would be unrealistic to think radicals and reformers will see eye-to-eye about exactly how people's belief systems must change. But we should be able to agree that changing belief systems is at the core of what popular reform movements must be about. Questioning the system can be an integral part of motivating people to challenge the status quo. While radicals need to remember that repelling those whose beliefs we seek to change is hardly a recipe for success, reformers need to get over their knee jerk fear that raising the issue of system change, or taking strong actions, are counterproductive when done well. At a minimum, reform leaders need to stop denouncing those who challenge myths that chain us all.

Spring in the air

By Jay Thiemeyer

Sounds like bees in a jar; no Harley. Somebody musta just left out of a nearby bar. A coffee bar. Hopped on his scooter and hit the high notes. Full throttle on his wee bike, making as much noise as he can. Even if it isn't much. Just an intense whining sound.

Later, much later, around two or later, in the wee hours, I hear the Harley of some late night aficionado of pain and poison, wind of his (her) bike out going over the bridge. I'm reading and waiting for sleep. The sound comes at me through the window, out of nowhere. A rumble like an approaching herd of buffalo. Or such I would imagine. A leaden, coughing, rumble growing steadily louder, rising to a keening sound. Then disappearing in my dreams as the bridge is left and the night envelops whoever is on their machine, feeling wind and freedom beating against the temple doors. The temple of late night peace when no one else is around, only the feel of true

freedom. Like falling down a bottomless well of dark inclusion. Like driving down The Columbia Gorge, blind at midnight.

Hope that person on the scooter enjoys himself because it doesn't sound at this early hour of the day, with the lights still on and the cops just starting their day, like he's gonna last too long. But can't blame him at all. On a Spring day like this, the cool and warm currents mixing, feistiness presides. And the sap rises. And the heartbeat quickens and the foot on the pedal gets itchy and the fist on the throttle gets twisted, and the wind feels so good against the skin and the eyes and the hair pulled back like something was being ripped out and replaced.

And no sooner does the first one fade then another starts its engine nearby and climbs the bridge, reaching for the sky and all the wind in the world.