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# Gar Alperovitz

*The renowned historian and economist's new book calls for a new democratic political economy*

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"Ideas are important, but unless you can bring that vision down to earth, it's just pie-in-the-sky," Gar Alperovitz said. This philosophy seems to guide much of his work. A distinguished historian, political economist, activist and writer, Alperovitz is well known for his critically acclaimed books on the atomic bomb and atomic diplomacy. He has also written extensively on the subject of building alternative economic systems and, among his many achievements, he was the architect of the first modern steel industry attempt at worker-ownership in Youngstown, Ohio.

His latest book, "Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth," builds on his vision for a new economy — one that goes "beyond corporate capitalism and state socialism" to create a democratic political economy "from the ground up." Released online for free by The Next System Project, where Alperovitz serves as cochair, "Principles" is a handbook for activists, organizers and practitioners, weaving together theory and practice and highlighting many examples of "institution-building projects" already underway in communities across the country. Alperovitz argues that these projects — which include public banks, worker cooperatives,

municipal land trusts and urban farms — can serve as the building blocks for the new democratic society and economy that we so desperately need: the "next system."

In this time of deepening political, economic and ecological crisis, Alperovitz's vision and extensive research helps readers imagine what is possible and inspires them to roll up their sleeves and get to work making change in their local communities. Alperovitz spoke by phone, discussing his newest book and his perspective on the current political moment.

**A.B.:** *What is The Next System Project?*

**G.A.:** The Next System Project is an attempt to open a big debate. If you don't like corporate capitalism and you don't like state socialism, what really do you want, and how do we get there? On one hand, we have people debating design for systems beyond capitalism and socialism. On the other hand, we look at very specific institutions like public banks in cities or community-owned land or nonprofit structures that provide services — institutions that would, if you build them up piece by piece, begin to look like pieces of a next system.

**A.B.:** *In "Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth," you argue that we are in the midst of a "systemic crisis." Please explain.*

**G.A.:** A systemic crisis is one in which the basic trends — like inequality, incarceration, civil liberties, ecological sustainability and climate change — get worse decade by decade by decade no matter who is elected, so that the crisis is much deeper than simply politics. What are the fundamental institutions in the system driving the long trends? You can't change the trends in a positive direction unless you change the institutional design. I think we are in the midst of a profound systemic crisis, and I think it's time to debate alternatives and begin building many variations on the next system.

**A.B.:** *What is the "Pluralist Commonwealth"?*

**G.A.:** The vision of what I call the Pluralist Commonwealth is that any viable democratic and ecologically sustainable next system is going to have plural forms of common ownership. So, for example, starting at the bottom, the ordinary cooperative is a particular form of common or democratic ownership.

A neighborhood land trust in which the neighborhood owns housing and land is a neighborhood form of common ownership. A city public utility is a larger form. A state bank, as in North Dakota, is somewhat larger. The Tennessee Valley Authority, which covers seven states

and has both power and environmental aspects, is a larger publicly owned wealth or utility form. State ownership of nationalized industry, such as the French railroads, or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), would be an example. Rather than the vision of state-owned companies in the socialist vision, I look for different forms of democratic ownership based on what is appropriate to the specific function. So, for example, in land-use it's probably a neighborhood or a small cooperative store. [It's important to] look at the functions that make sense at different scales, and in all cases honor the principle of democracy while building out a community vision from the ground up.

**A.B.:** *How does this vision relate to and intersect with the goals and efforts of social movements?*

**G.A.:** It intersects directly, but I think in some cases it's the next step. It's not either/or. For instance, in the environmental movement and the climate change movement, on the one hand there's a resistance to various forms of institutions that pour CO<sup>2</sup> into the environment, and on the other hand there's installation of solar panels by a worker co-op, or a community-owned windmill, or state-owned windmills. It's not only resisting and not only legislation and not only movement-building, but also simultaneously generating new institutions that are built to support the vision rather than, as in the Big Oil companies, opposing the vision. We're trying to build institutions that support democracy and ecological sustainability as a matter of inherent design of the institution.

Whereas Exxon, for example, as a matter of inherent design of the institution, must sell more oil and must create more problems for the climate. That's what we mean by institutional or system change — changing the inherent property of institutions.

**A.B.:** *You write about the importance of establishing a new institutional basis for progressive politics. In the past, you point out, labor unions provided the backbone for progressive movements.*

**G.A.:** Most progressives who are alive today come out of a progressive vision that assumed corporate capitalism as the fundamental design of the system, but it was reformed by politics that would try to establish regulation of the environment or labor laws or Social Security and so forth without changing the nature of the system. It wasn't just politics at the core of the reform programs, there were also institutions that gave it real muscle. Throughout the Western world and the

United States, the most important of these institutions were labor unions. They supported liberalism and they supported social democracy even when there were fights within movements. When I was much younger I worked for Sen. Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day. And he was a great environmentalist, but

he was also strongly backed by labor unions and could not have been elected without labor-union backing. Most people who think about movement-building forget about the importance of institutions. Now labor unions have gone from 34 percent of the labor force down to 6 percent in the private sector. So one of the tasks of the future politics, and particularly system change, is to build new institutions that can also help build the politics at the same time they change the nature of the institutions. It's both movement-building and institution-building.

**A.B.:** *Let's talk about the 2016 U.S. election. A lot of people are still trying to understand the outcome.*

**G.A.:** I think the dangers of real repression or a very right-wing government were always there. One of the reasons is that there is just too much anger and too much loss of power. Labor unions are too weak to support progressive politics, and there's too much upset and anger available to fuel right-wing politicians all over the world. I think that is why we've had this kind of election. In one sense, it's the collapse of the old traditional liberal alternative — what's called social democracy in Europe — and part of that is the loss of labor unions. That means that the power balance changes radically in the favor of big corporations and in favor of people with very right-wing politics. We need to change the institutional power balance as well as the politics. We also have to go beyond resistance. Resistance is very important, but

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