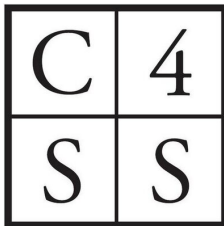


BEHIND THEIR SHIBBOLETH OF “SCALE” IS A BROADER SET OF UNEXAMINED ASSUMPTIONS THAT AMOUNTS TO A “FOLK POLITICS” OF THEIR OWN: A SET OF MANAGERIALIST JUST-SO STORIES, INHERITED FROM LEADING ECONOMIC IDEOLOGISTS OF THE MASS-PRODUCTION ERA LIKE SCHUMPETER, GALBRAITH AND CHANDLER



# BOOK REVIEW

INVENTING THE FUTURE

REVIEWED BY KEVIN CARSON



institutions they are building in the interstices of the dying state-capitalist system. The larger systems of coordination, the media ecologies, and so forth, are an emergent phenomenon following from the primacy of efforts on the ground.

For Srnicek and Williams, on the other hand, the main focus in building a post-capitalist society is what the capitalists and their state have already built or are building; the strategy is to accelerate that construction process and put it under new management via a macro political process. At best, their attitude towards commons-based counter-institutions is permissive tolerance towards a secondary praxis that's fine as long as it doesn't divert effort or resources from their primary political strategy; at worse it's contemptuous dismissal as a "folk-political" distraction from the real effort.

I approached this book with considerable eagerness and predisposed to like it. It belongs to a broad milieu of -isms for which I have strong sympathies (postcapitalism, autonomism, left-accelerationism, "fully automated luxury communism," etc.). So I was dismayed by how quickly my eager anticipation turned to anger when I started reading it. Through the first third of the book, I fully expected to open my review with "I read this book so you don't have to." But having read through all of it, I actually want you to read it.

There is a great deal of value in the book, once you get past all the strawman ranting about "folk politics" in the first part. There is a lot to appreciate in the rest of the book if you can ignore the recurring gratuitous gibes at horizontalism and localism along the way. The only other author I can think of who similarly combines brilliant analysis with bad faith caricatures of his perceived adversaries is Murray Bookchin.

I quote at length from their discussion of folk politics:

As a first approximation, we can... define folk politics as a collective and historically constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power. As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies which were previously capable of transforming collective power into emancipatory gains have now become drained of their effectiveness.... Petitions, occupations, strikes, vanguard parties, affinity groups, trade unions: all arose out of particular historical conditions. Yet the fact that certain ways of organizing and acting were once useful does not guarantee their continued relevance.... Our world has moved on, becoming more complex, abstract, nonlinear and global than ever before.

Against the abstractions and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasizing temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy. In terms of temporal immediacy, contemporary folk politics typically remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations and governments, rather than initiating actions); ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics (mobilizing around single-issue politics or emphasizing process); prefers practices that are often inherently fleeting (such as occupations and temporary autonomous zones); chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future (for instance, the repeated dreams of a return to ‘good’ Keynesian capitalism); and expresses itself as a predilection for the voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (as in the romanticisation of rioting and insurrection).

In terms of spatial immediacy, folk politics privileges the local as the site of authenticity (as in the 100-miles diet or local currencies), habitually chooses the small over the large (as in the veneration of small-scale communities or local businesses); favours projects that are un-scalable beyond a small community (for instance, general assemblies and direct democracy) and often rejects the project of hegemony, valuing withdrawal or exit rather than building a broad counter-hegemony. Likewise, folk politics prefers that actions be taken by participants themselves—in its emphasis on direct action, for example—and sees decision-making as something to be carried out by each individual rather than by any representative. The problems of scale and extension are either ignored or smoothed over in folk-political

consumption. The ideal means of production for local manufacturing are high-tech CNC machinery. But production in small workshops in Kropotkinian agro-industrial villages is far less amenable to automation of processes like handling feedstock, and is likely to involve human craft workers (working short hours in self-managed shops) reprogramming the machines and transferring intermediate products from one machine to another; total automation, in contrast, would require much higher levels of centralization and scales of production, with most production and distribution being coordinated by long-distance logistics with an extremely “thick” and materials-intensive infrastructure.

And getting back to the theme of capitalism and the state being subject to systemic decay, and people turning to the building blocks of the successor society and developing them as a necessity for survival, the transition is likely to take the institutional form of a growing share of production shifting from corporate control, wage labor and the cash nexus into the social economy, with micro-villages and other multi-family primary social units taking over production for direct subsistence. The long-distance logistics networks that are eventually automated with self-driving trains and ships, RFID chips and GPS tracking are apt to be much smaller in volume than those of the present.

For all the good in this book, and all that it offers of value to the broader post-capitalist and post-scarcity milieu of which Srnicek and Williams are a part, their approach itself is fundamentally opposite to that of the autonomists and other horizontalists — and in every case, they come off the worse in comparison. Autonomists and horizontalists, no less than accelerationists, acknowledge the importance of strategic coordination, integration and coalescence into a macro system, including the creation of federal bodies, media ecosystems and the like. But for them, the primary orientation is one of respect for the agency and self-organization of ordinary people as revolutionary subjects and creators of the successor system, and for the myriad of counter-

broad populist unity.

And, yet again, I am banging my head on my desk wondering what strawman caricature of “localism” and “horizontalism” the authors consider incompatible with the above statement.

I also agree that “media institutions are an essential part of any emergent political ecology aimed at building a new hegemony.... [Its tasks include] creating a new common language..., generating narratives that resonate with people,” etc. Creating visible organizations with spokespersons who get included into TV journalists’ rolodexes is vital.

The brain trust ecology must include not only post-capitalist counterparts of the Mont Pelerin Society and CFR, but Gramscian “organic intellectuals” from the movements on the ground who are directly involved in creating the institutions.

My biggest area of skepticism regarding their agenda is “full automation.”

...logistics is at the forefront of the automation of work, and therefore represents a prime example of what a postcapitalist world might look like: machines humming along and handling the difficult labour that humans would otherwise be forced to do.

No doubt global supply and distribution chains would be the most efficient way of producing some goods in a postcapitalist future (although, equally no doubt, a much smaller share of total production than Srnicek and Williams assume). And the transportation and warehouses involved in these networks are a logical target for 100% automation. But a great deal of production, probably including the production of most components and the final assembly of a majority of consumer goods and the production of most fruits and vegetables, is likely to be on a small-scale, on-demand basis near the point of

thinking.

Finally, in terms of conceptual immediacy, there is a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systematic thinking; for feeling over thinking...; for the particular over the universal...; and for the ethical over the political.... Organizations and communities are to be transparent, rejecting in advance any conceptual mediation, or even modest amounts of complexity.... As a result, any process of constructing a universal politics is rejected from the outset.

Understood in these ways, we can detect traces of folk politics in organizations and movements like Occupy, Spain’s 15M, student occupations..., most forms of horizontalism, the Zapatistas, and contemporary anarchist-tinged politics....

...But no single position embodies all of these dispositions.... The ideas that characterise this tendency are widely dispersed throughout the contemporary left, but some positions are more folk-political than others.... [T]he problem with folk politics is not that it starts from the local; all politics begins from the local. The problem is rather that folk-political thinking is content to remain at (and even privileges) that level.... Therefore, the point is not simply to reject folk politics. Folk politics is a necessary component of any successful political project, but it can only be a starting point.... [Finally,] folk politics is only a problem for particular types of projects: those that seek to move beyond capitalism. Folk-political thinking can be perfectly well adapted to other political projects aimed solely at

resistance, movements organized around local issues, and small-scale projects.... Strategic reflection—on means and ends, enemies and allies—is necessary before approaching any political project. Given the nature of global capitalism, any postcapitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and global approach—one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing.

...[F]olk politics lacks the tools to transform neoliberalism into something else.... The project of this book is to begin outlining an alternative—a way for the left to navigate from the local to the global, and synthesise the particular with the universal.

...If complexity presently outstrips humanity's capacities to think and control, there are two options: one is to reduce complexity down to a human scale; the other is to expand humanity's capacities. We endorse the latter position.

They trace contemporary folk-political wisdom to the experience of the late '60s, when the New Left rejected the parallel growth of totalizing bureaucracies in Western corporate capitalism and state communism. Much of this critique, they stipulate, is valid.

...At its most extreme, however, this antisystemic politics led towards the identification of political power as *inherently* tainted by oppressive, patriarchal and domineering tendencies. This leaves something of a paradox. On the one hand, it could choose some form of negotiation or accommodation with existing power structures, which would tend toward the corruption or co-optation of the new left. But on the other hand, it could choose to remain marginal, and thereby unable to transform those elements of society

advocated that such movements expand their ties both locally and globally with the open-source movement and the open hardware/maker movement in order to create the kernels of multifaceted local commons-based economies including not only cooperative retail but micromanufacturing, Permaculture, pro-information freedom policies and exclusive use of open-source software by local government and universities, municipal high-speed broadband, land trusts, transformation of unused public buildings into community hubs, etc. And many projects are engaged in just such institution-building projects. The entire movement, in short, eminently illustrates what Srnicek and Williams call for:

...Every successful movement has been the result, not of a single organisational type, but of a broad ecology of organisations. These have operated, in a more or less coordinated way, to carry out the division of labour necessary for political change. In the process of transformation leaders will arise, but there is no vanguard party—only mobile vanguard functions. An ecology of organisations means a pluralism of forces, able to positively feedback on their comparative strengths. It requires mobilisation under a common vision of an alternative world, rather than loose and pragmatic alliances. And it entails developing an array of broadly compatible organisations.... This means that the overarching architecture of such an ecology is a relatively decentralized and networked form—but, unlike in the standard horizontalist vision, this ecology should also include hierarchical and closed groups as elements of the broader network.... The divisions between spontaneous uprisings and organisational longevity, short-term desires and long-term strategy, have split what should be a broadly consistent project for building a post-work world. Organisational diversity should be combined with

such a venture, Podemos, did not fare particularly well); rather, various constituencies within M15 reconfigured themselves at the local level in assorted commons-based municipalist movement and made significant gains both at the local level and a networked nation- and continent-wide political force, not as Indignados per se.

The discussion of “organisational ecology” and attendant practical recommendations is quite good, aside from the obligatory dig at “folk politics” in passing.

On a purely quantitative level, the left is not noticeably ‘weaker’ than the right—in terms of its ability to achieve popular mobilisation, the reverse seems to be true. Particularly in terms of crisis, the left seems eminently capable of mobilising a populist movement. The problem lies in the next step: how the force is organized and deployed. For folk politics, organisation has meant a fetishistic attachment to localist and horizontalist approaches that often undermine the construction of an expansive counter-hegemonic power.

Once again, it’s hard to decipher, behind all this straw, what actual aspects of horizontalism and localism they see as militating against an “organisational ecology.” To return to my recurring example of recent municipalist movements, we have not only the post-M15 movements in Spain but allied movements across Europe from Antwerp to Bologna to Greece, as well as the Evergreen project in Cleveland and Cooperation Jackson and dozens and dozens of similar movements in the U.S. and UK. Besides these mutually supporting local movements there is a growing, multi-layered and robust support network of academics, think tanks, and networked assemblies promoting this model, from the Foundation for Peer-to-Peer Alternatives to the Right to the City Alliance. I myself have, for several years, strenuously

not already convinced of its agenda. The critiques many of these antisystemic movements made of established forms of state, capitalist and old-left bureaucratic power were largely accurate. Yet antisystemic politics offered few resources to build a new movement capable of contending against capitalist hegemony.

...[The dissemination of feminist, anti-racist, gay-rights and anti-bureaucratic demands on a global level] represented an absolutely necessary moment of self-critique by the left, and the legacy of folk-political tactics finds its appropriate historical conditions here. Simultaneously, however, an inability or lack of desire to turn the more radical sides of these projects into hegemonic ones also had important consequences for the period of destabilization that followed. While capable of generating an array of new and powerful ideas of human freedom, the new social movements were generally unable to replace the faltering social democratic order.

As the old Keynesian/Social Democratic order became destabilized, neoliberalism managed to dominate the debate over a replacement order and control the framing of alternatives, and the Left was unable to offer a coherent, unified counter-proposition. And neoliberalism, by partially conceding to the racial and gender justice demands of the left, gained additional leverage in pursuing its economic agenda

It was against this backdrop that folk-political institutions increasingly sedimented as a new common sense and came to be expressed in the alter-globalisation movements. These movements emerged in two phases. The first, appearing from the mid

1990s through to the early 2000s, consisted of groups such as the Zapatistas, anti-capitalists, alter-globalisers, and participants in the World Social Forum and global anti-war protests. A second phase began immediately after the 2007-09 financial crisis and featured various groups united by their similar organisational forms and ideological positions, including the Occupy movement, Spain's 15M and various national-level student movements.... Drawing influence from the earlier social movements, this latest cycle of struggles comprises groups that tend to privilege the local and the spontaneous, the horizontal and the anti-state.... On its own, however, this kind of politics is unable to give rise to long-lasting forces that might supersede, rather than merely resist, global capitalism.

These are all themes which Srnicek and Williams stated even more crudely and explicitly—if you can believe it—in their [accelerationist manifesto](#) of 2013, which they went on to develop into this book. Anything local or horizontalist is “luddite tree-hugging crypto-primmie hippie crap.”

In fairness, in the Afterword to the new edition they issue the disclaimer—no doubt sincere—that the “folk politics” they denounce does not equate localism, horizontalism or prefiguration as such—just the current folk-political tendency to pursue it for its own sake when it is not suited to the situation or is actively counter-productive. Rather, it's an implicit tendency frequently found within localism, horizontalism and prefiguration. To be more exact, “the concept [of folk politics] is designed to pick out a particular subset of characteristics from them.”

But what they consider problematic about this subset of characteristics is itself conceptually flawed: they distinguish

automation, rising precarity and expanding unemployment. We believe many unions will be better served by refocusing towards a post-work society and the liberating aspects of a reduced working week, job sharing and a basic income.

They are entirely correct in calling for the development of a broad common post-work Left agenda in preparation for the coming economic and political crises over automation and technological unemployment—already foreshadowed by the increase in precarity, the shift to poorly paid service sector jobs and the disappearance of full-time benefits as a norm.

Their concrete political agenda—full automation, universal basic income, reduced standard working hours and destruction of “work ethic” culture—is fairly unremarkable for their milieu, although their explanation of the harm done by the work ethic and the benefits of Basic Income for the bargaining power of labor is unusually lucid. But their pose of distinguishing themselves from the rest of the Left, which is allegedly not doing any of these things, and the novelty of calling for an ecosystem of leftist movements and organizations promoting this common agenda on the Mont Pelerin model, is a bit much given the array of thinkers from Dyer-Witheford to Negri and Hardt to Rifkin to Mason, the apparent “steam engine time” for UBI in Western politics, and growing popular fear of technological unemployment from automation.

Things like shorter work hours and Basic Income are definitely suited to viral memetic propagation and to the coalescence of a networked alliance of movements sharing those goals or something similar to them. But such an alliance is appropriate for specific movements and organizations under the Occupy umbrella—quite conceivably a majority of them—not Occupy itself. In Spain, M15 as such did not venture into formulating a concrete political agenda (or at least the most visible approximation of



probably connected to their dim view of Occupy.

In arguing for cross-sectoral alliances between wage-workers, the unemployed and those engaged in unpaid reproductive labor, Srnicek and Williams also echo autonomist thinkers like Negri and Hardt, Harvey, etc.:

This requires... a recognition of the social nature of struggle, and the bridging of the gap between the workplace and the community. Problems at work spill over into the home and the community, and vice versa. At the same time, crucial support for union action comes from the community, and unions would best be served by recognizing their indebtedness to the invisible labour of those outside the workplace. These include not only domestic labourers, who reproduce the living conditions of waged workers, but also immigrant workers, precarious workers and the broad array of those in surplus populations who share in the miseries of capitalism. The focus of unions therefore needs to expand beyond supporting only dues-paying members.... Unions can involve themselves in community issues like housing, demonstrating the value of organised labour in the process. Rather than being built solely around workplaces, unions would therefore be more adequate to today's conditions if they organised around regional spaces and communities.

In expanding the spatial focus of union organising, local workplace demands open up into a broad range of social demands.... [T]his involves questioning the Fordist infatuation with permanent jobs and social democracy, and the traditional union focus on wages and job preservation. An assessment must be made of the viability of these classic demands in the face of

“good” attempts at local counter-institution building (e.g. the Black Panthers’ community initiatives like school lunches, community patrols, kindergartens, etc.) from “bad” folk-political localism insofar as these movements sought to “scale [their] efforts” in keeping with a global strategy rather than to “withdraw” into a “prefigurative paradise.”

The very reference to “scaling” betrays their failure to examine their real implicit bias against decentralism and horizontalism as such, and all the questionable assumptions behind it. They repeatedly use the expression “scale up”:

...[P]references for immediacy in democracy... hold back its spatial scalability. To put it simply, direct democracy requires small communities.... The very mechanisms and ideals of direct democracy (face-to-face discussion) make it difficult to exist beyond small communities, and make it virtually impossible to respond to problems of national, regional and global democracy.... Small communities of the kind required by direct democracy are not a suitable goal for a modern left movement....

How can it be expanded and scaled up?

But like others I have encountered who share their unconscious technological assumptions, they throw the phrase around without making it at all clear what they mean by it. For example, in an argument with an apologist for industrial agriculture I pointed to the superior productivity of soil-intensive horticulture in terms of output per acre (e.g. Jeavons’s raised bed techniques that can feed one person on one-tenth of an acre); their response was “Yes, but how will you scale it up?” I kept pressing them to explain what that meant: “Why does it need to ‘scale up’ at all? If one person can feed themselves with a tenth of an acre, or a village can feed itself with fifty acres, why does any single operation need to be

larger?” I get the impression some advocates of “scaling up” are unable to grasp the possibility of 300 million people brushing their teeth in an uncoordinated effort using their own toothbrushes, unless it is somehow “scaled up” to everybody brushing at one time with a single 10,000 ton toothbrush—coordinated by a central body that formulates tooth-brushing guidelines. If an individual action is already taking place at the optimal scale, the best way to “scale up” is probably to proliferate horizontally.

Their fundamental aesthetic distaste for decentralism and horizontalism as such—all their protestations to the contrary, sincere or not, notwithstanding—is almost palpable. To verify this, we need only look at the much harsher, and less qualified, language in their original manifesto. They go so far as to quote favorably from Lenin’s denunciation of left-communist ideas on self-management as an “infantile disorder.”

Socialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalist engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science. It is inconceivable without planned state organisation which keeps tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a unified standard in production and distribution. We Marxists have always spoken of this, and it is not worth while wasting two seconds talking to people who do not understand even this (anarchists and a good half of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries).

Behind their shibboleth of “scale” is a broader set of unexamined assumptions that amounts to a “folk politics” of their own: a set of managerialist just-so stories, inherited from leading economic ideologists of the mass-production era like Schumpeter, Galbraith and Chandler, about the inherent superior efficiencies of large scale and the superior productivity of capital-intensive forms of production. This comes through, repeatedly, in their very choice

cognitive scaffolding that enables us to leverage symbolic thought to expand our horizons. The development, deepening and expansion of knowledge enable us to imagine and achieve capacities that are otherwise unattainable. As we acquire technical knowledge of our built environment and scientific knowledge of the natural world, and come to understand the fluid tendencies of the social world, we gain greater powers to act.

They also agree with Toni Negri and Michael Hardt on a number of topics. For example, the growing share of productivity that results from collective capacities like scientific knowledge, language, culture, etc. We are at the point where emergent aspects of human interaction are becoming the greatest source of productive capacity.

They agree, likewise, with much of their class analysis, e.g. in acknowledging the decomposition of the traditional proletariat and the need for a new revolutionary subject to replace it. However they choose “people” as the new revolutionary subject, which carries vaguely monolithic implications and doesn’t correspond very well to Negri’s and Hardt’s “multitude.”

In order for the “people” of populism to merge, however, additional elements are necessary. First, one particular demand or struggle must come to stand in for the rest.... The difference between a populist movement and folk-political approaches [is that] whereas the former seeks to build a common language and project, the latter prefers differences to express themselves as differences and to avoid any universalizing function.

Their failure to recognize the benefits of a unity-in-diversity or of stigmergic organization, on the pattern of the multitude, is

synthetic freedom, or in other words, to enable the flourishing of all of humanity and the expansion of our collective horizons....

Underlying this idea of emancipation is a vision of humanity as a transformative and constructible hypothesis: one that is built through theoretical and practical experimentation and elaboration.... What we are and what we can become are open-ended projects to be constructed in the course of time.... This is a project of self-realisation, but one without a pre-established endpoint. It is only through undergoing the process of revision and construction that humanity can come to know itself.... Emancipation, under this vision, would therefore mean increasing the capacity of humanity to act according to whatever its desires might become.

They echo Gramsci on the transition from the “realm of necessity” to a realm of freedom. Reduction of necessity is positive freedom. For much of human history, living in a community entailed having a guaranteed right of access, or share, in the community’s common ownership of much of the means of livelihood. And the movement for commons governance entails treatment of a growing share of the prerequisites for action as a social commons.

A full range of synthetic freedom must seek to expand our capacities beyond what is currently possible.... That is to say, freedom cannot simply be equated with making existing options viable, but instead must be open to the largest possible set of options. In this, collective resources are essential. Processes of social reasoning, for instance, can enable common understandings of the world, creating a ‘we’ in the process that has much greater powers to act than individuals alone. Equally, language is effectively

of examples to illustrate what they consider toxic folk-political versions of localism.

Indeed, highly inefficient local food production techniques may be more costly than efficiently grown globally sourced foodstuffs.

Here I can only suggest an intensive reading course that focuses heavily on Jeavons, Frances Moore Lappe and Permaculture. Most neoliberal defenses of industrial factory farming involve numerous strawman fallacies, typically juxtaposing mechanized chemical agribusiness against archaic stand-ins for “organic” agriculture that ignore modern organic agriculture’s massive incorporation of soil science and microbiology, and the superior efficiency in output per acre of intensive techniques. In addition the “inefficiency” critiques of the food-mile movement and food localism they cite, in particular, are flawed in many ways. Srnicek’s and Williams’s point that long-distance shipping of out-of-season produce may be more energy-efficient than greenhouse growing may be correct in some instances. But for in-season produce Ralph Borsodi’s observation that nothing can beat the efficiency of production at the actual point of consumption stands. “Food-mile” critiques still assume fairly conventional, transportation-intensive retail distribution systems, as opposed to the form food production is likely to actually take in a post-capitalist shift from the cash nexus to social economy: the production of most in-season fruits, vegetables, nuts, etc., in rooftop, backyard and neighborhood gardens, and exchange in neighborhood farmers’ markets.

They also accept at face value all of neoliberal capitalism’s claims about the superior efficiency of “comparative advantage” based on outsourced production and globalized logistic chains. “The rapid automation of logistics presents the utopian possibility of a globally interconnected system in which parts and goods can be shipped rapidly and efficiently without human labour.”

In so doing, they ignore cases where diverse local economies with small-scale production at the point of consumption are objectively more efficient. Indeed they smugly dismiss advocates of industrial relocation as essentially nothing more than Luddite hippies, motivated by false nostalgia and yearning for the “simplicity” of a world long gone.

Other movements argue for an approach of withdrawal, whereby individuals exit from existing social institutions... Often these approaches are explicitly opposed to complex societies, meaning that the ultimate implied destination is some form of communitarianism or anarcho-primitivism.

(Never mind that movements like autonomism also adopt an “approach of withdrawal,” which is explicitly based on the possibilities of advanced technology. They beg the question of whether the best approach to transition, in regard to existing institutions, is to conquer or withdraw from them. Their framing, quoted earlier, of “exit” and “building a counter-hegemony” as mutually exclusive alternatives, is fundamentally flawed; advocates of Exodus see their project as building a counter-hegemony through exit.)

In their localism these tree-hugging folk politicians, they say, ignore the “interconnectedness” of the world.

Shared between all of these [variants of localist ideology] is a belief that the abstraction and sheer scale of the modern world is at the root of our present political, ecological and economic problems, and that the solution therefore lies in adopting a ‘small is beautiful’ approach to the world.... The problem with localism is that, in attempting to reduce large-scale systemic problems to the more manageable sphere of the local community, it effectively denies the systemically interconnected

The point is, there *already are* a number of loosely associated subcurrents of the Left promoting similar versions of such a vision right now; just off the top of my head right now, I can think of the P2P Foundation, Grassroots Economic Organizing, the Solidarity Economy Network, and countless networked municipalist efforts like those in Barcelona, Madrid, Bologna, Cleveland and Jackson. And as a pop culture theme, it has resonated with the public at least since *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Ideas like Universal Basic Income and social media memes like Fully Automated Luxury Communism are spreading virally, and will increase their reach and impact exponentially as tens of millions are unemployed by automation in the next two decades. It would be wonderful if all these tendencies could do more to create mutual synergies, and promote the general concept of post-scarcity and reduced work as a visible alternative to neoliberalism. But far from engaging in such a cooperative effort, Srnicek and Williams are basically trying to put themselves forward as the inventors of this vision, and caricature all the subcurrents that have already been promoting it all this time as a bunch of Luddites.

The book’s treatment of “synthetic”—as opposed to both “negative” and “positive”—freedom is especially good.

Whereas negative freedom is concerned with assuring the formal right to avoid interference, ‘synthetic freedom’ recognizes that a formal right without a material capacity is worthless. ...[W]e are all formally free not to take a job, but most of us are nevertheless practically forced into accepting whatever is on offer.... This reveals the significance of having the means to realise a formal right, and it is this emphasis on the means and capacities to act that is crucial for a leftist approach to freedom.... The more capacity we have to act, the freer we are.... A primary aim of a postcapitalist world would therefore be to maximise

Whereas folk-political approaches lack an enticing vision of the future...

Once again we're back to the straw, which the authors can never leave far behind. In contrasting their embrace of "modernity" with "folk politics," under which heading they lump essentially all horizontalist movements, they (deliberately?) obscure the existence of movements like autonomism that are very much about reclaiming a vision centered on technological progress.

But straw aside, I'm entirely in favor of their proposal for a recuperated version of the postwar Mont Pelerin strategy, with the Left presenting broad images of an appealing future centered on the liberatory potential of technology.

The classic Leninist strategy of building dual power with a revolutionary party and overthrowing the state is obsolete. Proponents of the Bolshevik Revolution model appear more useful as historical re-enactors than as guides for contemporary politics....

Given the limits of these other approaches [insurrection and reformism], we argue that the best way forward is a counter-hegemonic strategy.... A counter-hegemonic strategy entails a project to overturn the dominant neoliberal common sense and rejuvenate collective imagination. Fundamentally, it is an attempt to install a new common sense.... In this, it involves preparatory work for moments when full-scale struggle erupts, transforming our social imagination and reconfiguring our sense of what is possible. It builds up support and a common language for a new world, seeking to alter the balance of power in preparation for when a crisis upsets the legitimacy of society.

nature of today's world. Problems such as global exploitation, planetary climate change, rising surplus populations, and the repeated crises of capitalism are abstract in appearance, complex in structure, and non-localised.... Fundamentally, these are systemic and abstract problems, requiring systemic and abstract responses.

...Though undoubtedly well-meaning, both the radical and mainstream left partake in localist politics and economics to their detriment.

In their paean to interconnectedness, they ignore the fact that a great deal of this "interconnectedness" is artificial, resulting from state subsidies and protections to economic activity and division of labor on a scale far beyond the point of diminishing returns. As Murray Bookchin argued, much of the "complexity" used to justify centralism is unnecessary. It can be "rationally simplified"

by reducing or eliminating commercial bureaucracies, needless reliance on goods from abroad that can be produced by recycling at home, and the underutilization of local resources that are now ignored because they are not "competitively" priced: in short, eliminating the vast paraphernalia of goods and services that may be indispensable to profit-making and competition but not to the rational distribution of goods in a cooperative society ["The Ecological Crisis and the Need to Remake Society"].

To take one example of a manufactured need for large scale, consider auto production. Most of existing engine block weight results from the need for additional horsepower for rapid acceleration in freeway driving. And Detroit's three-story stamping presses result entirely from design choices (i.e. curved body panels) made for purely aesthetic reasons. In a society with

mixed-use communities built on the pre-automobile pattern for travel by foot, bike or public transit, and with light rail for travel between communities, the private automobile's ideal users would be those in low-density areas outside of towns not served by light rail heads (e.g. truck farmers needing to get in and out of town). This could be accomplished with the light engine blocks of the original Model-T factories, or for that matter with light electrical motors produced by local industry. And flat body panels could be cut out in a neighborhood garage factory.

Besides that, "interconnectedness" is not a generic quality—there are different kinds of interconnectedness, and a critique of strawman "localism" that does not differentiate between them is useless; far better is an approach (like the P2P Foundation's "Design Globally, Produce Locally") that tailors itself to what's appropriate for different spheres of life.

And the cooptation of new, decentralized production technologies and job shop production over the past few decades by corporations with global supply chains was only possible by state intervention. Massive transportation subsidies play a role, of course, but perhaps more important is the use of patent and trademark law to give global corporations a legal monopoly on the disposal of outsourced production. They—they, who chide others for clinging to past models in the face of material and technological reality—ignore *recent and ongoing* developments in production technology that enable a growing share of consumption goods to be produced with cheap micro-manufacturing tools for neighborhood and community consumption, including outside the cash nexus in the informal, social and household sectors, not less but *more* efficiently than can be done for their much-vaunted global supply and distribution chains.

The most forward-thinking specialists in lean, just-in-time manufacturing themselves say as much. For example H. Thomas Johnson, who wrote the Foreword to Waddell's and Bodek's

Once we get past the part of the book devoted primarily to the critique of "folk politics," the subsequent sections on the reasons for the triumph of neoliberalism and their own program for a post-capitalist agenda are quite good. Like David Graeber they see the origin of cash nexus-dominated societies and wage labor, not as the natural outgrowth of a "tendency to truck and barter" or the "original accumulation of capital," but as an imposition of the state. Likewise "private property"—as opposed to possession—as a construct. The process of imposing the cash nexus has entailed the artificial creation of property rights—most notably the nullification of common rights to the land through enclosure, and the creation of "intellectual property"—in order that there be more scarce private goods to truck and barter in. And they understand the massive scale of the ongoing state intervention required to keep the cash nexus functioning.

Our view is that, contrary to its popular presentation, neoliberalism differs from classical liberalism in ascribing a significant role to the state. A major task of neoliberalism has therefore been to take control of the state and repurpose it.... [Unlike classical liberals], neoliberals understand that markets are not 'natural'. Markets... must instead be consciously constructed, sometimes from the ground up.

At the same time, they credit the Mont Pelerin Society and all the neoliberal nodes clustered around it of building a toolkit of proposals and waiting until the time was opportune to put it forth as an alternative—namely during the crisis of Keynesianism in the 70s. But that is arguably what the decentralist Left is doing in building an ecosystem of counter-institutions, ready to be adopted as survival mechanisms when capitalism hits its terminal crises.

We argue that a key element of any future-oriented left must be to contest the idea of 'modernity'.

society can become a meaningful strategic option. This will involve a broad counter-hegemonic project that seeks to overturn neoliberal common sense and to rearticulate new understandings of ‘modernisation’, ‘work’ and ‘freedom’. This will necessarily be a populist project that mobilises a broad swath of society....

Perhaps so. Nevertheless, the relative importance of large-scale social mobilization and electoral politics is at its lowest point in over a century, and the importance of prefigurative counter-institutions has grown correspondingly.

That is not to deny that strategic coordination would be invaluable, or that such a transition would be smoother and less painful with the help of friendly forces in electoral politics. I would be the last to deny the possible role of other forms of strategic engagement with the dying system, in addition to the creation of prefigurative building-blocks and working from the ground up, as part of the mix.

Attempts to engage the state to make it less statelike, to (in Proudhon’s phrase) dissolve it in society, are as old as the anarchist movement. In my opinion there is much promise in projects to transform the state along the lines of Michel Bauwens’s “Partner State,” and in concrete efforts like the local municipalist platforms and regional commons assemblies in Europe to achieve something much like that. And there is more to be gained than lost by putting sympathetic parties like Syriza inside national governments—so long as it is clearly understood that their primary role is to run interference on behalf of the social movements efforts on the ground to construct a new society and give them more breathing room, and not (as was actually the case with Syriza) to undertake the primary effort of building the society themselves or using the social movements as bargaining chips in negotiating with the European Central Bank.

*Rebirth of American Industry* (a magisterial book on adapting managerial accounting models to the Toyota Production System), argued that introducing Taichi Ohno’s production model into a transnational corporate framework amounted to putting new wine in old bottles.

The cheap fossil fuel energy sources that have always supported [large-scale manufacturing] cannot be taken for granted any longer. One proposal that has great merit is that of rebuilding our economy around smaller-scale, locally-focused organizations that provide just as high a standard living [sic] as people now enjoy, but with far less energy and resource consumption. Helping to create the sustainable local living economy may be the most exciting frontier yet for architects of lean operations.

Lean production guru James Womack observed (*Lean Thinking*), similarly, that “oceans and lean production are not compatible.” Simply shifting inventories from giant warehouses of finished product or intermediate goods to warehouses disguised as trucks and container ships isn’t really reducing overall inventory stocks at all. It’s just sweeping the batch-and-queue bloat of Sloanism under the rug. The outsourced component manufacturers are located on the wrong side of the world from both their engineering operations and their customers... [in order] to reduce the cost per hour of labor.”

The production process in these remotely located, high-scale facilities may even be in some form of flow, but... the flow of the product stops at the end of the plant.

In other words, Williams and Srnicek are drinking the neoliberal capitalist Kool-Aid in taking at face value the claims of efficiency for global supply and distribution chains. They really do not

reflect superior efficiency at all, but rather the irrationalities resulting from perverse incentives under capitalism. Far more efficient, as a high-tech manufacturing model, is a networked local economy of job shops with CNC machines like that of Emilia-Romagna/Bologna, oriented to supplying local markets; or better yet, an economy of even cheaper and smaller tabletop CNC machines in workshops producing for multi-family cohousing projects, neighborhoods and micro-villages.

In short, Srnicek and Williams are at least as guilty as any they criticize of failing to adapt their strategy to changed circumstances; in this case they fail to acknowledge the radical technological advances in cheapening, ephemeralization and reduced scale of production machinery, and to take advantage of their promise for creating a counter-economy outside the existing capitalist economy and leaving the latter to starve for lack of labor-power or demand, instead of taking it over.

They apply similar assumptions to political organization and strategy, treating stigmergic, horizontalist movements enabled by network communications tech as “a rejection of complexity,” or as “unscalable” when they’re actually a different *kind* of scalability. And accusing the new wave of horizontalist movements of having no strategic vision for scalability or “counter-hegemony” is ridiculous. Whatever you think of it, the municipalist strategy that emerged from M15 and allied movements in Europe is a coherent strategy. If anything US Occupy is an outlier in treating the occupations and General Assemblies as ends in themselves without using them as the launchpad for building an ecology of counter-institutions.

One of the most revolutionary effects of networked communications technology is lowering the transaction costs of stigmergic organization over larger spatial areas.

Stigmergic, or networked, organization is characterized by a module-platform architecture. The way it “scales up” is not by

...Capitalism did not emerge all at once, but instead percolated to a position of dominance over a course of centuries. A large number of components had to be put in place: landless labourers, widespread commodity production, private property, technical sophistication, centralization of wealth, a bourgeois class, a work ethic, and so on. These historical conditions are the components that enabled the systemic logic of capitalism eventually gain traction in the world. The lesson here is that, just as capitalism relied upon the accumulation of a particular set of components, so too will postcapitalism. It will neither emerge all at once nor in the wake of some revolutionary moment. The task of the left must be to work out the conditions for postcapitalism and to struggle to build them on a continually expanding scale.

And this transition is not something to be brought about only through political activism and the exertion of will, or that will be inevitably be suppressed or coopted by capitalism absent such activism and exertion. There are also material forces in place making for some such transition, on the same pattern as the internal decay of classical political economy and feudalism from their own internal contradictions, and the emergence of successor systems from the coalescence of many components according to laws of growth.

To the extent that they acknowledge the possibility of capitalism being a system in terminal decline, they do so only in passing, as they state that

[a] post-work world will not emerge out of the benevolence of capitalists, the inevitable tendencies of the economy or the necessity of crisis... [T]he power of the left... needs to be rebuilt before a post-work



global corporate system and draining it of resources, have an effect that is cumulative and synergistic. And coupled with networked resistance campaigns against mining companies, oil and gas pipelines, etc., they achieve a still higher synergy. Even uncoordinated actions that cumulatively raise the costs of resource inputs or undermine artificial scarcity rents from information, obstruct connectivity and disrupt production chains, or sap capital of needed labor-power and demand on the margin—especially in an environment in which such actions, obstructions and withdrawal are proliferating and are facilitated by material and technological developments—are themselves part of the terminal crisis.

So the primary drivers of the post-capitalist transition are likely to be spontaneous. On the one side the crisis tendencies of capitalism, increasing levels of unemployment and underemployment and precarious living conditions of the working class, the failure of employer- and state-based safety nets, Peak Resource Input crises and the state's faltering ability to provide capital with the subsidies it needs to remain profitable or to enforce patent and copyright law, the state's inability to suppress cheap and efficient sources of direct subsistence outside the wage system. On the other, the availability of such small-scale, high-tech means of direct production for use in the social economy, and the proliferation of commons-based institutions for co-production and mutual aid. At the same time that growing unemployment and underemployment and the collapsing safety net makes the turn to alternatives imperative, alternatives are coming to hand on an unprecedented level. The only real question is how much path dependency and cultural inertia must be overcome for the pressure on one side to connect with the vacuum on the other, and for a tipping point to be reached; nevertheless the likelihood that such a point will be reached amounts to an issue of hydraulics.

As Srnicek and Williams themselves note:

creating progressively larger organizational units under a common management, but by proliferating small units horizontally.

And a key benefit of stigmergic organization is that, in a large horizontal network consisting of many nodes, a useful tactical innovation can be rapidly picked up and adopted by many or most nodes in the network—essentially amounting to the coordinated use of that tactic by the network—without any central coordinating or permission-granting authority being required.

Criticism of Occupy for failing to coalesce around a set of demands like post-work is misplaced, and reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of that movement. Occupy was a platform for an entire stigmergic network of movements, providing a common enemy, a common toolkit, and common symbolism. Any anticapitalist movement opposed to economic inequality and the 1% could access this platform and avail itself of this toolkit, regardless of its specific agenda or goals.

In the case of Occupy, local nodes of the movement developed promising innovations (see the Appendix to my book *The Desktop Regulatory State*, pp. 379-84) that for the most part were not picked up by the rest of the network. For this the movement deserves legitimate criticism. But it is misleading to chalk this failure up to the horizontalist model as such. This brings us, in turn, to a criticism of the authors that I will repeat later: their reliance on Occupy as a model is itself misleading. The Occupy movement, arguably, was an outlier in the degree to which it relied exclusively or primarily on the encampments as an organizational model, and pursued a version of “prefigurative politics” limited largely to the general assemblies and other internal aspects of the encampments themselves.

Srnicek and Williams argue that spontaneous uprisings like urban unrest in 1960s America, or the Occupy movement, can be very effective in putting pressure on ruling elites. But they fail to do so

unless they make alliances with more permanent organizations that can help translate the immediate pressure into concrete political action. For example the Tahrir Square movement in Egypt building ties with organized labor, or Spain's post-M15 social movements "engag[ing] in a dual strategy both within and outside the party system.

No horizontalist movement that I'm aware of objects to alliances with more permanent organizations. Indeed such alliances with local labor unions, civil rights and social justice organizations, churches, etc., have been part of the basic toolkit of horizontalist organization going back to Saul Alinsky and community campaigns. Speaking for myself, I have no objection even to a dual strategy that includes political parties and electoral politics, so long as efforts within political parties do not crowd out, coopt or suck energy from efforts at counter-institution building. But Occupy's failure to do so was not a failure of "horizontalism" or "localism." M15, which the authors here mention favorably, was very much a horizontalist movement.

Their caricature of "prefigurative politics" is equally dishonest. Prefigurative politics is not lifestyle attempts at building "temporary autonomous zones." It is an attempt at planting the seeds or creating the building blocks of the future society right now, with the intent that they coalesce into something that eventually supplants the existing society.

Contrast Srnicek's and Williams's contemptuous dismissal of local prefigurative institutions as doomed exercises in lifestyleism with Massimo De Angelis's analysis of them as examples of an emerging commons-based alternative mode of production, in *Omnia Sunt Communia*. The goal is "expansion of the commons systems and their greater integration in commons ecologies" culminating in the future with "claiming the wealth produced by all social cooperation as commonwealth."

If anyone is guilty of imposing a one-size-fits-all strategy

And again, while strategic coordination to heighten the disruptive effect would be altogether desirable, the fact remains that the increased incidence of such disruptive attacks as part of the background noise of the system, the increasing feasibility of carrying them out, and the increasing vulnerability of global JIT capitalism to disruption by them, are all part of the transition process even without strategic coordination.

And in fact they are strategic in effect, insofar as connectivity is the strategic link in global capitalism, and its vulnerability to disruption is its central strategic weakness.

The same is true of another leverage point against Bauwens's and Iacomella's other systemic vulnerability: the declining enforceability of copyrights and patents. The proliferation of cheap, ephemeral production technologies means that the main engine of accumulation has shifted from ownership of the physical means of production to legal control of who is allowed to use them. So anything that undermines this legal control is striking a blow at the heart of the accumulation process.

On the other hand, Srnicek and Williams fail to address a key leverage point against capitalism, and one that has been heavily addressed by autonomists like Negri and Hardt: its vulnerability, thanks to cheap, ephemeral production technologies scaled to direct production for use in the household sector or for neighborhood and community markets, to exodus. The availability of such alternatives enables the partial and gradual withdrawal of labor from the capitalist wage system and its shift into the social economy—hence depriving the capitalist system, on the margin, of resources it needs and increasing the pressures on it.

Against this backdrop, strategies of obstruction and withdrawal do indeed "scale up," and make real strategic sense, in a way that Srnicek and Williams fail to recognize. Local economic counter-institutions, by creating possibilities for subsistence outside the

when local import substitution for raw materials, components, etc. is adopted as a solution to increasingly costly and disrupted supply and distribution chains.

Srnicek and Williams themselves seem to recognize as much:

If a populist movement successfully built a counter-hegemonic ecosystem of organisations, in order to become effective it would still require the capacity][to disrupt. Even with a healthy organisational ecology and a mass unified movement, change is impossible without opportunities to leverage the movement's power. Historically speaking, many of the most significant advances made by the labour movement were achieved by workers in key strategic locations. Regardless of whether they had widespread solidarity, high levels of class consciousness or an optimal organisational form, they achieved success by being able to insert themselves into and against the flow of capitalist accumulation. In fact, the best predictor of worker militancy and successful class struggle may be the workers' structural position in the economy.

They mention dock-workers, auto workers and coal miners as examples of workers who, at various times in the past, have been able to leverage their structural position into achieving significant victories against capital. I would add that transport and distribution workers, in particular, have a long history of expanding industry strikes into national or regional general strikes starting with the Pullman Strike of the 1890s. Attacks on the distribution system by non-workers (e.g. the highly effective blockade of Israeli shipping on the U.S. West Coast by BDS activists) have also been quite disruptive, especially when joined by workers. And the recently-emergent system of global supply and distribution chains operating on a just-in-time basis is especially vulnerable to disruption.

regardless of suitability to the situation, it's Srnicek and Williams, who ignore the existence of a strategic vision when it is found anywhere but in their own preferred model.

That's not to say that the building of counter-institutions should not be coordinated with political efforts of various sorts, including the organization of resistance to the state or even parties like Syriza and Podemos. But ideally efforts within party politics will, while promoting political objectives like UBI or copyright rollback, also run interference on behalf of local institution-building efforts and actively promote public awareness and enthusiasm for them. Ideally, a political effort that gains power at the polls like Syriza will pursue a good cop, bad cop strategy in negotiating with neoliberal forces like the European Central Bank: "We'll try to negotiate with you, but we can't control what our local comrades on the ground are doing on their own." The worst-case scenario is what actually happened, with Syriza being coopted by the ECB and used as a stick against the post-Syntaxma movements.

And if Occupy made a grave strategic error in fetishizing the General Assemblies as an end in themselves, rather than sporulating into an ecology of institution-building movements like M15—which I agree with Srnicek and Williams that it did—an equally grave error would have been for it to either be coopted internally by the Workers World Party or Avakian cultists, as very nearly happened and was averted by David Graeber and his horizontalist allies, or coopted externally by efforts like Van Johnson's to transform it into a voter mobilization arm for the Democratic Party's neoliberal agenda.

Occupy was greatly at fault for not building permanent local alliances on the pattern of Community Campaigns or Corporate Campaigns with a whole range of established labor, environmental and social justice organizations, and directing their energies into building lasting counter-institutions in cooperation with other existing movements after the camps were shut down.

Compare this to M15 in Spain, which actually pioneered the general assembly model picked up by Occupy in the United States. Unlike American occupiers, who mostly viewed the dissolution of the camps as the end of the movement, the Spanish Indignados took the dissolution of their large general assemblies as a jumping-off point to create small, permanent neighborhood assemblies devoted to building commons-based counter-institutions. These continuing efforts by the Indignados—coming from an ideological space every bit as “horizontalist” as Occupy—eventually grew into the municipalist movements that have achieved major political influence in Barcelona, Madrid and other cities, and spread further to cities across Europe.

Even in the United States, although the direct lines of influence from Occupy are weaker, there is an array both of preexisting municipalist movements in cities like Cleveland and Jackson that were invigorated by the Occupy movement, and many other such local movements that have grown directly out of it.

Even so, it’s true that purely stigmergic coordination may be insufficient in some cases, and that movements must be coordinated by discussion in larger federal bodies. Again, though, the focus on Occupy is misleading. Those municipalist movements in Europe, starting in Spain and spreading through cities all over Europe (Bologna and Antwerp particularly notable among them), have created Assemblies of the Commons and other federal coordinating bodies on a continent-wide scale. But that doesn’t fit the authors’ narrative regarding the failures of “horizontalism.”

Srnicek and Williams acknowledge Argentina’s achievements compared to Occupy, most notably the factory recuperations. Nevertheless they find them wanting. There was some coordination between neighborhood assemblies in Argentina, but such inter-neighborhood assemblies “never approached the point of replacing the state, or of being able to present themselves as a viable alternative” in providing functions like “welfare, healthcare,

The capitalist economy is reaching the point of Peak Resource crises (e.g. Peak Oil) and the state’s inability to subsidize and socialize input costs as fast as capital’s need for them is growing (thanks to the “fiscal crisis of the state”), and at the time the “intellectual property” laws that capital depends on for a massive and growing share of its profits are becoming increasingly unenforceable.

Likewise, in dismissing (as another manifestation of “folk politics” and “immediacy,” of course) local obstruction and resistance movements like #NoDAPL, they miss the real point: how the proliferation of such movements, against the backdrop of capitalist decay, amount cumulatively to yet another crisis tendency that will further stress the dying system and hasten its death by attrition.

In the specific case of anti-pipeline movements, the combination of obstruction and physical delays, legal and administrative challenges, divestment movements, and sabotage of already completed pipelines, have together become a permanent part of the cost-benefit calculation of any new pipeline project, and reduce the likelihood on the margin that such projects will be completed in the future. In so doing, they have exacerbated (and continue to exacerbate) the system’s declining capacity to provide the extensive addition of subsidized inputs capital relies on for its profits. This is a real shift in the correlation of forces between the dying old system, and the new one-coming into being—regardless of whether or not it is coordinated on a dying level. The system’s growing vulnerability to such disruption, and the increasing feasibility of such disruption, are themselves part of the system’s death process.

In the case of resisting transnational mining corporations, a combined strategy of raising the costs and difficulties for extractive corporations and substituting (on a partial but increasing scale) locally salvaged and recycled inputs, is an approach with potentially systemic effects. That’s all the more true

Prefigurative alternatives are not the strategic means by which to defeat a properly functioning capitalism in full bloom. They are the seeds of a new system which will gradually develop to replace a system in decay.

And simply assuming that capitalism will coopt them as the basis for a new lease on life via the next Kondratiev wave or “engine of accumulation,” etc., begs the question of whether it can.

[Michel Bauwens and Franco Iacomella](#) argue that capitalism is beset by twin crisis tendencies that undermine the two central supports it has depended on up to now for its continued survival and expansion. Those two supports are artificial abundance of cheap, subsidized material resource inputs, and artificial scarcity of information.

1. The current political economy is based on a false idea of material abundance. We call it pseudo-abundance. It is based on a commitment to permanent growth, the infinite accumulation of capital and debt-driven dynamics through compound interest. This is unsustainable, of course, because infinite growth is logically and physically impossible in any physically constrained, finite system.

2. The current political economy is based on a false idea of “immaterial scarcity.” It believes that an exaggerated set of intellectual property monopolies – for copyrights, trademarks and patents – should restrain the sharing of scientific, social and economic innovations. Hence the system discourages human cooperation, excludes many people from benefiting from innovation and slows the collective learning of humanity. In an age of grave global challenges, the political economy keeps many practical alternatives sequestered behind private firewalls or unfunded if they cannot generate adequate profits.

redistribution, education, and so on...”

Beyond these organisational limits, the key problem with Argentina as a model for postcapitalism is that it was simply a salve for the problems of capitalism, but not an alternative to it. As the economy started to improve, participation in the neighborhood assemblies and alternative economies drastically declined. The post-crisis horizontalist movements in Argentina were built as an emergency response to the collapse of the existing order, not as a competitor to a relatively well-functioning order....

In the case of both neighborhood assemblies and worker-controlled factories, we see that the primary organisational models of horizontalism are insufficient. They are often reactive tactics that fail to compete in the antagonistic environment of global capitalism.

Yes, prefigurative counter-institutions tend to arise in periods of downturn and crisis, and then to fade away or be coopted in times of recovery. But there is more to the picture than the normal business cycle. Besides cyclical downturns, there are secular or systemic crises characterized by long-term falling direct rate of profit, stagnant wages, growing levels of precarity and underemployment, etc. And these tendencies carry with them a longer-term shift to counter-institutions as normal means of survival. James O'Connor noted, in *Accumulation Crisis*, that workers not only shifted their efforts in part from wage labor to direct production for use in the household and social economy during downturns, but did the same thing on a more permanent basis in response to long-term systemic downturns.

What it boils down to is an inability on their part to understand “prefiguration” on its own terms. One of their greatest

shortcomings, in such strawman attacks on prefigurative institutions, is their failure to take into account that capitalism is a system in terminal crisis. They take a snapshot approach, juxtaposing prefigurative institutions and attempts at “withdrawal” against a triumphal capitalism, and then warn that prefigurative projects will be coopted into the capitalist framework. Prefigurative movements will fail,

partly because they misrecognize the nature of their opponent. Capitalism is an aggressively expansive universal, from which efforts to segregate a space of autonomy are bound to fail. Withdrawal, resistance, localism and autonomous spaces represent a defensive game against an uncompromising and incessantly encroaching capitalism.

But it is Srnicek and Williams who are guilty of misrecognizing the strategic situation. They fail to address the question of whether the system is a system with an end, which won't be able to keep “encroaching” because it is exhausting its potential for expansion. As they point out themselves:

With the dynamics of accumulation at the heart of capital, a non-expansionary capitalism is an oxymoron.

Yes. Capitalism can only survive by expanding. And it is reaching, or has already reached, the limits of all the kinds of artificial abundance in subsidized resource inputs, and artificial scarcity as a source of rents from enclosure of various commons, which have to this point allowed it to keep expanding. *Therefore...??* So close to getting the point, and yet so far.

Srnicek and Williams treat the correlation of forces between the horizontalist movements and their counter-institutions, and the forces of state and capital, as largely static rather than a moment in a multigenerational transition process. But all these local

counter-institutions and other building blocks are developing against the backdrop of the decaying system within which they exist.

They are not ephemeral exercises in lifestylism, doomed to be periodically wiped out like Zion in the *Matrix* trilogy. By far the majority of people and groups engaged in prefigurative efforts see themselves as “scaling up” by creating counter-institutions which will proliferate horizontally and become building block institutions of post-capitalist society. And exodus (“withdrawal”) is based on a strategic assessment of capitalism's crisis tendencies and vulnerable points, with the aim of taking advantage of the possibilities of new technology for directly producing for consumption in whatever cases it has become cheaper and more efficient to do so than to work for wages and purchase on the cash nexus, in order to starve the wage system and the engine of accumulation.

In the framework of De Angelis, the circuit of capital and the circuit of the commons have coexisted and interacted since the beginning of capitalism, with the correlation of forces between them constantly shifting. We're in the early states of a transition process in which the correlation of forces are shifting permanently towards the commons.

This longer transition process will be one of the local building blocks coalescing into a whole and supplanting the old system as it becomes progressively weakened and bankrupted and retreats from the scene. And the coalescence of the new system, as various components are adopted more and more widely and grow into an ecosystem, will occur precisely as a “killer app” made necessary for survival by the collapse of the old system. What occurred in Argentina as a local and cyclical phenomenon, and compelled the partial and temporary adoption of alternative economic models, will of necessity occur on a more widespread and permanent basis when the collapse is global and systemic.