

PARECON: Has the hour arrived for a WSF model?*

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Michael Albert, who is expected shortly in Greece in the context of his world tour to promote the model for a post-capitalist economy under the name “PARTicipatory ECONomics”, is a leading cadre of the World Social Forum (WSF) and a close associate of Noam Chomsky. He is also the founder of ZNet, i.e. the electronic empire which mainly promotes the views of the international reformist Left. The model, which has been designed by Albert (together with Hahnel) over the course of the last ten years, is now suggested that it could be utilised to put flesh on the bones of the abstract WSF vision for “an alternative world (which) is possible”. In this context, a massive promotion campaign to promote the book under the same title has been launched through the use of Znet’s list of hundreds of thousands of subscribers and the backing of the ex anti capitalist and now reformist Left—like the *New Left Review* which published his book. However, although it has become more urgent than ever before to consider the concrete forms that a post capitalist society could take, following the collapse of “actually existing socialism” and the huge doubts that this historic event casted over the very possibility to organise a post-capitalist society, I will briefly try to show that Parecon is, in effect, more disorientating than thought-provoking for the following fundamental reasons:

FIRST, Parecon attempts to mix incompatible proposals together, in an obvious effort to engineer a consensual ideological soup, similar to the one which characterises the WSF proclamations. Although Albert does not hesitate to state that his model comprises socialist or direct democratic values while characterising it as an «anarchistic economic vision», in reality, Parecon does not belong to any of the historical traditions of the Left and, in my view, is simply a (supposedly pluralistic) mixture which aims, exactly like the WSF, to satisfy every taste.

Thus, despite the fact that Parecon talks about workers’ councils, it cannot be classified in the socialist tradition since these councils do not constitute the exclusive source of power, as in socialist models, but they simply share power with consumers’ councils, whereas the respective powers of each type of council are not even clearly delineated. Similarly, the communist principle “from each according to his/her ability to each according to his/her need” is bypassed (Parecon characterises the problem as a matter of compassion to be sorted out through the free provision of some social services like health and a minimum income) in favour of the supposedly more “advanced” principle of remuneration for effort and sacrifice! Likewise, the critical issues of the transition strategy and revolution are also bypassed, while WSF’s reformist anti-globalisation strategy is adopted. And, of course, Parecon does not belong to the Marxist tradition since it talks about a “vision” and does not possess any historical analysis of the present society, it does not share the Marxist

definition of classes and so on.

Also, Parecon cannot be classified as belonging to the libertarian or the autonomous-democratic tradition, since the main collective decision-making bodies in it are clearly defined within the economic sphere. Thus, the concept of citizen is totally absent and is replaced by the concepts of the worker and the consumer—thereby introducing into the proposed post-capitalist society the economic dualism of modern man that capitalist society established and, at the same time, adopting the present division of society into economic and political spheres! No wonder that Parecon ends up with a distortion of the concept of direct democracy (as I have attempted to show elsewhere – see *Chomsky's capitalism, Albert's post capitalism and Inclusive Democracy*, Athens, Gordios 2004) which, however, it invokes. It is clear that Albert (as well as Habermas, Bobio and other supporters of the “civil society” approach), sees direct democracy not as a regime but simply as a procedure, which in fact is readily replaced by its opposite, i.e. representation, whenever direct democracy is not compatible with Parecon's prescriptions! It is not, therefore, surprising that the inexistence of citizen in this model eventually leads to “interested parties' assemblies” of a kind, rather than to direct-democracy assemblies. This is particularly the case if one takes into account that Parecon adopts an “instrumentalist” conception of politics, according to which people have a say in decisions only in proportion to the degree to which the outcomes affect them, in other words, they take part in the decision-taking process not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. This is of course similar to the present society's conception of politics in which one engages in political action simply to promote one's welfare and not in accordance with the principles intrinsic to political life, such as freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, courage and excellence. In this context, it is not surprising that Parecon implies a particularly bureaucratic structure, which aptly was characterised by John Crump, a libertarian academic in *Anarchist Studies*, as “participatory bureaucracy”!

SECONDLY, in contrast, for example, to the Marxist proposals for a socialist society, or Castoriadis' autonomy project, or that of Inclusive Democracy, Parecon is not a fully-fledged political project with its own historical analysis of present reality but simply a narrow economic model for an alternative economy—a model which does not hesitate to use the theoretical and methodological tools of orthodox economics, presumably with the aim of enjoying the esteem of orthodox economists. This could go a long way to explaining the fact that although this model was developed more than a decade ago, it refers only to economic institutions and is silent on the political and broadly social institutions associated with it, on the flimsy excuse that «models for such institutions still await development». It is therefore fair to assume that the model's deafening silence on the crucial issues that historically have divided the Left (e.g. the existence/role of the state, the form that social ownership of the means of production will take etc) is deliberate. It is obvious that Albert's ambition is to create a consensus around his model that would band together everyone from supporters of statist socialism to anarchists and adherents of the new social movements (Greens, feminists et al). Sadly, this effort seems to be welcomed by the post-modern faction of the antisystemic Left, from anarchists of the American-Institute-of-Anarchist-Studies variety to post Marxists, who seem to have no qualms about adopting post-modern ideological soups like that of Parecon!

THIRDLY, Parecon is not backed by any political, historical or philosophical analysis which would attempt to justify it but simply relies on the author's rejection of certain elements of the present system, as well as the values he drew from “the aspirations and the

insights of a huge range of activist efforts”. In other words, Parecon does not justify the need for a post-capitalist society on the basis of, for instance, a dialectics of History (as dialectical materialism does), or a dialectics of Nature (as Social Ecology’s dialectical naturalism does), or, perhaps, an axiomatic choice between the autonomy and heteronomy traditions (as the autonomy project and —with some significant deviations— the Inclusive Democracy project do). However, a serious proposal on the form of a future post-capitalist society cannot just be the object of some intellectual’s vision and the moral values he draws from social struggles. Such a proposal, if it is to be credible, must constitute a fully-fledged political project, which, integrated into one of the historical traditions of the Left, draws the organisational principles of the future society from a systematic analysis of present society and the trends within it. From this point of view, the antisystemic Left does not need to adopt supposedly pluralistic visions which could only serve as significant contributors to the present postmodernist ideological soup, and perhaps to the WSF as ideological models of the “alternative world which is possible” that it preaches.

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