POSTCAPITALIST DECISION MAKING

SERIES: TOWARDS (A BETTER) POSTCAPITALISM
A HANDY HOW-TO GUIDE

by Michael Albert

méta Working Papers

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Postcapitalist Decision Making

Michael Albert

SERIES

Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide

méta Working Papers' series "Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide" publishes solicited policy papers on aspects of how would a non-dystopian postcapitalism look like. The series focuses on three 'pillars':

Production | Allocation | Decision Making

i.e., how could/would postcapitalist *production* be like (and who would own the means of production), what shape would the *allocation* of goods take (and which alternatives to the market economy may be explored), and what would be the main tenets of postcapitalist *decision making* and *democracy*.

In this paper, **Michael Albert** addresses the third pillar, i.e. postcapitalist decision making.

Michael Albert is a founder and current member of the staff of **Z Magazine** as well as staff of Z Magazine's web system: **ZCom**. Albert's radicalization occurred during the 1960s. His political involvements, starting then and continuing to the present, have ranged from local, regional, and national organizing projects and campaigns to co-founding South End Press, Z Magazine, the Z Media Institute, and ZNet, and to working on all these projects, writing for various publications and publishers, giving public talks, etc. Albert is the author of 21 books. Most recently these include: *Fanfare for the Future* (ZBooks), *Remembering Tomorrow* (Seven Stories Press), *Realizing Hope* (Zed Press) and *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso).

Decision making is multifaceted. The *thing decided* is not alone important. *How we decide* also matters. Further, how we decide has two parts. First, we deliberate. Second, we tally preferences into a choice.

It follows that to accomplish ideal decision making we need to have worthy and possible deliberation. We need to have worthy and possible tallying into choices. But around these basics, additional considerations surface. How will we ensure that our deliberations and tallies yield excellent choices? How will we guarantee that nothing unduly delimits the spectrum of choices we address? That is, how will we ensure that nothing structurally pre-decides what affected people ought to themselves decide?

Some analysts of decision making pledge allegiance to democracy but typically barely indicate just what that means. Other analysts of decision making opt for super majorities, or for consensus. Some advocate autocratic rule by experts. And though virtually no one openly favours dictatorship, one person rule is undeniably widely utilized. Yet for our purposes here, the main thing to note is that none of these approaches offers a universal guideline for all decisions.

Consider. You work at some job in some industry. Who should decide whether you wear blue or black socks? Who should decide whether you can display a picture of your spouse or of your favourite athlete in your work space? You should decide that, don't you agree? More, you should decide that on your own, don't you think?

But what if you instead want to play loud music in that same work-space? Should those who work in another part of the plant have a say about that even if they won't hear it? No? Well, okay, should those elsewhere who would hear it have a say? Yes? Okay, should everyone who would hear it have the same say, or should someone who would be hugely bothered by the loud music have more say?

When I think about these hypothetical situations, I realize that I cannot sensibly advocate one universally preferred approach for how best to deliberate and then tally preferences regarding all decisions. Indeed, wouldn't you agree that anyone reasonable will have to favour different methods for different situations.

Even so, we can still ask, is there some consistent rationale that can nearly always smartly reveal what procedures we should favour? I find that I consistently have in mind a specific value that I want decision-making to attain. I call this preferred value "self-management." We should each have a say in decisions in proportion to the degree we will be affected by those decisions. If a decision will affect us not at all, we should have no say. If a decision will affect us considerably, we should have considerable say. In choosing how to tally preferences, it seems that this guiding norm can lead us to sensibly favour different methods for different situations.

But it's elementary that to have a say doesn't only depend on being able to appropriately register your preference at tallying time. It also depends on being able to appropriately express your views along the way so that you can learn from and impact others' views regarding the pending choice. Too much deliberation can certainly belabour the obvious. Too much deliberation can waste time. But too little deliberation can exclude voices that need to be heard. Too little deliberation can not only subvert good process, it can also undermine prospects for arriving at good choices. So what's the happy compromise?

How about we choose our method of deliberation for each decision rather like we choose our method of tallying preferences for each choice? We try to have our deliberation facilitate self-management. We try to have each person involved able to engage with the issues in question so as to later register their preference in proportion as they will be affected. But having such aims, we should remember that this is a social dynamic. Making a decision is not like building a bridge or doing a calculation. Success doesn't demand perfection. In fact, perfection is likely beyond achieving and most often even beyond knowing. Sometimes the closest we can come to attaining perfect self-management is majority rule. Sometimes requiring a super majority can come closer. Sometimes requiring consensus will do the job best. Sometimes even just one person deciding will best approximate self-management as with our earlier mentioned black or blue socks example. Similarly, a period of extended discussion and debate, perhaps over an extended period, may best permit people to have appropriate influence while not expending excessive time or effort. Other times, a more streamlined approach may make better sense. The point is, both deliberative and tally procedures are tactics and not goals. They are

not principles. They are not one method fits all situations. They are largely contextual. In contrast, self-management is a nearly universal goal that we can almost always use to guide our choice of how to deliberate and how to tally preferences.

However, if we follow this line of argument and adopt self-management as an aim for postcapitalist decision making, we encounter a new and significant problem. What postcapitalist structures can we implement in order to allow or, better, facilitate self-management?

In economic production, consumption, and allocation, we have workers, and we have consumers—with many people doing both, of course. In contrast, in political legislation of rules and norms, adjudication of disputes and violations, and collective implementation of, for example, disease control or public safety, we have some people with specific political tasks and responsibilities, and we also have the whole citizenry. In families or living groups concerned with procreation, nurturance, sexual relations, and daily life we have family members with different roles. In communities we have people who again fulfil diverse roles, for example in religions and in cultural communications and celebrations, and we have the whole community membership. In each case, for us to have self-managed decision making, what preconditions do new roles and structures need to abide, or better, to propel?

Here we will only discuss workers and consumers in their economic roles and choices, though I suspect that with some tweaking the rough overall logic applicable to any of these domains applies more generally to the rest of the domains. Be that as it may, here we observe that to be able to make economic decisions in a self-managing manner, all

those affected by economic decisions must have a venue where they can freely deliberate and also appropriately register and tally their preferences. To acknowledge and honour activist history we might choose to call these economic decision-making venues workers and consumers councils. Clearly, each such council would include individuals and likely also teams and divisions on the production side, and would include individuals, living units, and perhaps a neighbourhood amalgam of units on the consumption side. More, encompassing each council we can anticipate federations of councils that would cover industries and regions, and so on. Self-management seems to literally necessitate this type of arrangement. Simply put, you cannot have self-management if those affected by decisions don't have a vehicle through which to impact deliberations about issues and to then express their preferences for eventual choices.

So, suppose we advocate workers and consumers councils that utilize self-managed decision making. Their members deliberate issues with time and energy commensurate to the issues' importance and complexity, but not beyond that importance and complexity. Their members tally preferences using procedures chosen to best approximate giving all actors a say in proportion as they are affected. This appears to be a good start, but additional questions arise. Who decides on the deliberation procedures for speaking, for contesting claims, for presenting evidence, and so on? And who decides what tallying procedures to use?

The answer—as with the answer to all economic “who decides” questions—is the workers and consumers decide. They decide sometimes as individuals, sometimes in small teams or living units, sometimes in larger workplace divisions or neighbourhoods, sometimes in

whole workplaces or “counties,” and sometimes in an industry federation of councils or in a large geographic federation of consumer councils. And we can reasonably guess that in a postcapitalist society which will have polity, kinship, and community also revolutionized, people who value their time and effort will specify a range of deliberation procedures deemed suitable for different types of decisions, and will specify a range of tallying procedures deemed suitable for different types of decisions, so they can in turn employ those favoured approaches as conditions require, rather than their having to start from scratch and/or try for some unknowable perfection in every case.

So, consider a workplace. As earlier noted, some decisions will be left to individuals because they affect overwhelmingly just an individual. But consider you are in a team, in a division, in a workplace. Certain overall decisions will apply to the whole workplace. They will be decided in the overall workers council. Those council decisions will set certain norms and procedures that in turn apply to everyone, or to nearly everyone in the workplace. For example, they might include decisions about duration of the work day, scheduling various tasks during the work day, holidays, requirements about the overall organization of work, or guidelines for output for the coming period. Then, however, a division within that same workplace will no doubt have lots of choices regarding how to implement its own particular tasks and how to conduct its own particular activities even as it abides the overall workplace-wide choices. The division itself decides matters bearing overwhelmingly on itself. This gives the division members higher say over such choices, appropriately, while it also translates and maintains the broader level of influence that the rest of the workers council should rightly have on those matters. The same thing happens

regarding a team within a division, and then also an individual within a team. In general decision makers abide the choices that they were part of at more encompassing levels, but they then enact their own choices about matters which primarily affect themselves at their own levels. And essentially the same pattern prevails for producing writ still larger via industries and for consuming writ large or small via countries, states, counties, neighbours, living units, and individuals. As for production decisions, so for consumption decisions. More encompassing decisions set norms and aims for encompassed actors who in turn make their own choices in accord. And at every level, deliberative procedures and tallying methods aim to achieve self-management as well as possible without seeking such a degree of perfection as to waste time and effort for little improvement. Industry councils decide, then workplaces, then teams, and so on—where the encompassing level includes those encompassed, is governed by them, and set a context for their own later decisions. Similarly collective consumption decisions of country, state, county, or whatever are made by all those involved and in turn provide context for less encompassing decisions down to individual consumption choices. Self-management implies all of this. It doesn't dictate a detailed implementation of the many steps that may be utilized. Indeed, particular implementations of self-management may vary in details from workplace to workplace, from industry to industry, and from place to place or over time, and such contextually sensitive details are in any event highly likely to be unknown and even unknowable until folks experiment and experience the many factors involved. But self-management does imply the described overall logic and values.

Now, however, we encounter a considerable new problem. How do we ensure that participants are able to arrive at good choices? Also, how do we ensure that the choices people have dominion over, individually and in groups, haven't been structurally delimited in harmful ways before those affected even get to have a say?

Let's again consider a workplace. Imagine an issue involves a decision on which it is agreed that after modest deliberation majority rule should be utilized. We don't want more non-voters than voters. We don't want people voting but not feeling confident and informed about doing so. We don't want bad decisions to emerge due to people lacking background and disposition suited to deciding sensibly. We don't want most issues to never even come up for deliberation and decision because something about the circumstances and situations of the economy dictates the outcome regardless of peoples' preferences.

These problems may sound unlikely to arise, but they are now ubiquitous. Typically, there are more non-voters than voters in nearly all election decisions made by tallying preferences in modern elections. Of course, one might protest that elections are not in workplaces, however in workplaces the situation is worse. Workplace decisions are nearly always taken autocratically and even dictatorially. The overarching observation for now is that to participate fully in making decisions requires not only the opportunity and means but also the inclination. Further, people who choose among options may not have sufficient information, experience, and confidence to do a good job. Likewise, outcomes may be determined without wide participation not only because autocrats decide them, but also because ultimately no one has any choice. Circumstances make outcomes inevitable even against the preferences of most or even all people affected.

So, back to the workplace. First, why might a subset of the workforce be reluctant or eager to participate? Why might a subset be prepared or unprepared to participate? Why might a subset be likely or unlikely to arrive at sensible choices? And why might options to decide be sharply delimited even before anyone registers any preference at all?

The answers are for the most part visible all around us. A subset might be reluctant or eager to participate because they have or they lack prior experience with making decisions, and because they have, or they lack needed confidence. A subset might be prepared or unprepared to participate because they have or do not have access to relevant information. A subset may be likely to arrive at or unlikely to arrive at sensible choices because beyond experience, confidence, and information, they may or may not have needed skills. And as to why options might be sharply delimited, market competition, for example, might force competitive behaviour that rules out more solidaristic or empathetic choices, or command planning could simply impose outcomes.

Thus it turns out that having self-management within workplaces and also regarding consumption, or for that matter with some modest refinements having self-management in political decisions, or regarding culture and community decisions, or kinship decisions, involves going beyond having worthy deliberation and tallying procedures. It requires, as well, that we consider what changes in education can help prepare everyone to participate rather than, as now, prepare some to rule and others to obey and endure boredom. And then it requires that we consider the kinds of tasks people have and the impact their tasks have on peoples' mindsets, skills, and knowledge so, if

necessary, we discover how to rearrange tasks away from, for example, the current corporate division of labour which empowers about 20 percent and disempowers about 80 percent so the former participate in decision making but the latter do not. And it requires that we consider how other structures preserve or delimit options that people should decide, essentially dictating outcomes, for example by command (as with central planning) or by the logic of competition (as with markets), so we can develop mechanisms which are instead compatible with self-management.

Again, we return to the workplace. Imagine that workers in a firm expel or in some instances just happily wave goodbye to owners who leave on their own due to economic hard times. Assume also that engineers, accountants, managers, and other empowered employees also exit this workplace feeling that without the owners, collapse is inevitable. Assume the workers then organize themselves into a workers' council. Assume they adopt sensible deliberation and preference tallying procedures. Assume they undertake to conduct the affairs of the workplace. Assume the workers immediately change all incomes and institute universal voting but take the definition of the various jobs in their workplace for granted. The existing job definitions appear to them to be natural. They appear unalterable. The old division of labour therefore goes untouched. There remain in their workplace jobs that include overwhelmingly empowering tasks which employ about 20 percent of the workforce. There also remain in their workplace jobs that include overwhelmingly dis-empowering tasks which employ about 80 percent of the workforce. Even though everyone initially in the occupied workplace was a worker before, now some get

empowered by their new daily activities, while others continue to be disempowered by theirs.

In time, the former 20 percent, due to their empowering situations acquire information and enjoy access to daily authority. Their confidence and sense of efficacy grows. They begin to set the agendas for council discussions. They begin to do most talking in council meetings. Their will increasingly manifests in council outcomes. They begin to see themselves as more important and more deserving. The latter 80 percent, at the same time, endure unchanged conditions. Their confidence remains low. They continue to endure relatively passive involvements. They continue to lack information and to lack access to daily decision making. They initially attend council meetings in the euphoria of the initial takeover but as time passes, they attend council meetings increasingly as observers of what the empowered 20 percent are up to. And then they begin to not attend at all.

For those who wind up with disempowering circumstances their moment of self-management that occurred when the owner and many others left and the workers jubilantly took over, steadily declines back into pervasive subordination. Rule by the empowered 20 percent (some new hires, some previous workers taking on new responsibilities) climbs. Eventually one class, who I call the coordinator class, rules over another class, who I call the working class. The old division of labour imposes outcomes that no one initially sought.

More, even if workers who take over their plant from its prior owners alter their division of labour to try to rectify this structural bifurcation of employees into a ruling empowered group above a ruled disempowered group, either markets or central planning, if those are

maintained, would subvert their intentions. Markets would do so by requiring the workers council to engage in all sorts of alienated behaviour including competing fiercely by cutting costs and imposing draconian work conditions. To achieve such aims, the councils would elevate (or hire) some employees to rule over others with the anointed ones free from the deprivations they impose on the rest. Central planning would subvert the effort to attain and enlarge self-management by the central planners wishing to communicate with folks like themselves, not with uppity workers, so the central planners for that reason would work against or reverse any change in the division of labour.

All this requires a much longer presentation to convey in full, of course. But it is not just an argument from understanding human and institutional virtues and debits. It is also evidenced historically over and over once one has the conceptual categories needed to fully see the class divided situation. But for the argument here, the implication, even if not fully argued in so brief a space, is hopefully clear enough.

We want all actors to participate in decision making in a self-managing manner. We want good decisions. And we want to avoid what should be in actors' purview instead being structurally imposed. All this requires changes in workplaces and neighbourhoods such as establishing workers and consumers councils that utilize appropriate self-managing deliberation and tallying procedures. But it also requires changes that facilitate people wanting to and being equipped and prepared to participate effectively, and to then, in turn, to have a full spectrum of decisions to address. In this view, to seek self-management leads inexorably to having to also seek a new division of labour and a new mode of allocation. In the participatory economic approach this causes some additional positive commitments.

First, so that all workers are prepared and able, public education must develop the aptitudes and inclinations of every person as fully as the life that person chooses to pursue needs including taking account that everyone will have life roles that call for enthusiastic, confident, participation in deciding among options. More, the actual daily life circumstance of people—what we do and how we do it—need to be such that all actors develop confidence, accrue skills, have ties and connections, and garner knowledge suitable for effective participation in decision making. Such accomplishments, it turns out, will not simply support self-management, though they will certainly do that. Such accomplishments will also, in their own right, help overcome the tendency for a class hierarchy to exist between empowered and disempowered actors. Indeed, the point is such accomplishments will help overcome the undesirable outcome of a class that resides between labour and capital in capitalism rising to become the new ruling class in economies that eliminate private ownership of productive assets but maintain a corporate division of labour and markets or central planning.

Second, so that prepared, capable, and enthusiastic workers and consumers who are comparably empowered by their daily lives actually confront a full spectrum of decision options and not just a truncated set due to markets or central planning imposing outcomes, a worthy postcapitalist economy must transcend these two modes of allocation as well. To say that one or the other or a mix of the two must be chosen is simply to abandon hope for true and full self-management, classlessness, and much else that we desire for a postcapitalist economy.

Of course, our argument here regarding self-management in a postcapitalist economy is far from complete. Other essays in this *Meta* series address the new division of labour and the new means of allocation needed as part of a worthy postcapitalism and explain why participatory economics opts for what it calls balanced job complexes in place of the corporate division of labour and for participatory planning in place of markets and central planning. But here, hopefully, at least the need to address such issues rather than to only eliminate capitalist relations of ownership is evidenced.

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It has been noted that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, invoking the need for serious reflection on the end of the existing order and a transition to a postcapitalist way of life. Yet the future of the world economy is but one of the aspects of postcapitalism. After all, capitalism itself might be *prima facie* an economic system, but it has evolved into a comprehensive political, cultural, anthropological and international order. Postcapitalism, however it might evolve, is not merely the modification of an economic system; it will prove to be a new political, cultural, anthropological, civilisational paradigm — a new era indeed. A dystopian one, a utopian one, or anything in between. And the turbulences of the gradual transition are to be witnessed by all. The oligarchic decline of liberal democracy engenders countless variations of authoritarian tendencies; the supply chain of tributes for the global minotaur are increasingly interrupted; novel desiderata for emancipation are articulated; the chasms between megacities and provinces nurture silent, cold civil wars; the emergence of a non-Anglophone, non-Atlantic, non-liberal, non-bipartisan state as the planet's largest economy is just around the corner, overturning a two-centuries-old order; the changes in global demography and geopolitics are vertiginous; climate change is threatening our very existence. Transformations of gigantic proportions radically reshape the world before our very eyes.

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