

A Strategy for Contractionary Revolution

A. OVERSHOOT

1. To date, humankind has behaved much like any other species: it has appropriated all available natural resources in order to increase its numbers and to satisfy its wants. Under previous conditions of ecological plenitude this behavior helped us succeed in the struggle for life. Under current conditions of ecological scarcity it threatens both the integrity of the biosphere and the depletion of nonrenewable resources.
2. Our impact on nature increased gradually until about 1500. It then exploded, driving us into overshoot within 500 years. This *hyper-expansion* is associated with capitalism, an economic system based on the separation of society into two main classes: the owners of productive assets and those who sell their labor power to these owners. Ecological expansion is thus inherent in humankind as a biological species, whereas hyper-expansion is the greatly intensified expression of this attribute under capitalist conditions. Although both imperil our future, hyper-expansion is the short-term threat we must immediately address.
3. The Soviet Union arose in the 20th century as a socialist alternative to capitalism, but it adopted the unsustainable practices of its ideological rivals. Today China is the primary example of a growth-obsessed society that arose from the socialist model. These economies demonstrate that it is not the mode of ownership - private, public, or mixed - that is decisive for sustainable well-being, but rather the economic principles applied by those in control. The present strategy restricts itself to the capitalist economies. Thinkers in China and other non-capitalist countries are urged to develop comparable strategies based on their specific conditions.
4. Given the inescapable link between economic activities and ecological impact, these activities must be rapidly and significantly reduced for humankind as a whole. Given the disparity in consumption between rich and poor countries, this reduction must occur primarily in the rich countries.
5. Overshoot and injustice are both massive global problems. However, overshoot takes ethical precedence because it threatens not only the present generation of humankind, but also future generations, non-human species, and the biosphere itself. What is

required, and what this strategy attempts to provide, is a revolutionary process that sharply decreases our ecological impact while increasing global equity and well-being.

6. Global overshoot is unprecedented in human experience. For the first time in its history, our species as a whole must reduce its planetary presence. We therefore face not just another historical change, but rather a fundamental shift in our relationship with the earth: *the redirection of humankind's ecological trajectory from an expansionary to a contractionary path*. What this implies is that we cannot rely on economic ideas and arrangements that were developed during our expansionary past. We must think boldly and creatively to build a viable future.

B. ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

1. To achieve ecological contraction, our capitalist economies must be radically transformed. It is therefore critical that capitalism be addressed correctly. The central idea is that the enemy is not the system as a whole, but the specific factor within the system that is responsible for hyper-expansion. Our task is not to replace capitalism with a known alternative such as socialism, but to find combinations of capitalist, socialist, and novel economic elements that can reverse overshoot and achieve sustainable well-being.
2. Some features of capitalist economies are rooted in human nature. Others address core economic requirements, and would be useful in any systemic setting. All such features, to the extent that they are consistent with the strategy's goals, should be retained. To facilitate the selective rejection and retention of capitalism's features, the system can be conceptually split into its two main components: its economic logic and its institutions.
3. The term "economic logic" refers to the factors that guide an economy's activities and thus determine its main outcomes. The latter include the outputs that are produced and their quantities, resource utilization rates, waste flow rates, habitat destruction rates, and the population level.¹ The term "institutions" refers to the economy's remaining features, which help implement this logic. These include markets, monetary systems, property relations, and the system's legal infrastructure.
4. Capitalism's economic logic derives from the system's historical role, which is to rapidly increase production. It is expressed through the market interactions of two incentives: profit maximization by firms and the want satisfaction of manipulated consumers. Because this logic compels the economy to grow, it is the factor responsible for hyper-expansion and overshoot, and it must therefore be rejected for the purpose of economic guidance.
5. Although this rejection is necessary, it is not sufficient. In most cases, and certainly in the rich countries with their complex economies, a logic of some kind is required to establish economic outcomes. The only alternative is for an individual or group to fill this role, which is an open invitation to the abuse of power. Thus, for the purpose of economic guidance, the logic of capitalism must be replaced with a new logic that reflects the long-term interests of humankind. This is referred to here as *the logic of sustainable well-being*.²

6. "Replacing" capitalism's logic means that society, instead of acceding to the results of capitalist markets, applies the new logic to determine economic outcomes directly, and then strives to achieve them. For example, output quantities for trucks, lumber, and houses will be set according to human needs and natural limits, not the profit-maximizing manipulation of consumer desires. Similarly, labor productivity will be carefully optimized, not increased without limit; the population level will rise only if this permits a society to flourish, and never beyond the area's carrying capacity.
7. Unlike capitalism's logic, the system's institutions are not necessarily responsible for hyper-expansion, and for this reason should not be summarily rejected. Instead they should be vigorously tested for their usefulness in implementing the new logic. Those that pass this test should remain, likely in modified form. Those that fail should be eliminated. In other words, existing institutions should evolve under pressure from the logic of sustainable well-being, much as biological organisms evolve under pressure from the natural environment. The combination of logic replacement and institutional evolution, plus the introduction of any novel institutions that may be required, is called *organic change*.
8. Organic change embraces *technological neutrality* - the principle that sustainable well-being can be achieved at many technical levels, and that increasing an economy's technological complexity is therefore a social choice, not a development imperative. Technological neutrality counters the assumption, particularly among the rich, that economic progress is synonymous with rising scientific and technological sophistication, and thus with increasing productive capacity.
9. Although capitalism's logic must be rejected for the purpose of economic guidance, it may still prove to be useful, albeit in modified form. Once economic objectives have been rationally set, the incentives of profits and genuine (unmanipulated) wants should be considered as one way to achieve them. In this restricted sense, "business" and "markets" could continue to play important roles in a revolutionized economy.
10. Organic change will at times require measures that cause substantial sacrifice, and that could conflict with human nature. To maximize the social acceptance of such measures and to minimize abuses in their implementation, two principles should be adopted: transparency and democracy. Transparency means that the economic principles used to formulate objectives are widely understood, and that the analysis behind economic decisions is publicly disseminated. Democracy means that those making these decisions are elected, and possibly subject to recall if they violate the transparency principle. Where social compulsion is required - for example to expropriate property or to enforce new laws - the dignity and security of the individual must be ensured.
11. Capitalism cannot exist without its guiding logic. Thus, although capitalism's demise is not the explicit aim of this strategy, its successful implementation means that the system will be historically superseded. Stated differently, the strategy avoids an anti-capitalist stance in order to retain any useful features the system might offer, but it leads inevitably to a post-capitalist future.

C. POLITICAL STRUGGLE

1. As stated, reversing overshoot means that our economies must be radically transformed. However, economic transformation cannot be achieved without economic control. Economic control in turn requires political power, which can be achieved only through revolution. Reversing overshoot thus implies the need for *contractionary revolutions*. Although these revolutions will be complex, in essence they will pit those who support capitalism's economic logic - *expansionists* - against those who support the logic of sustainable well-being - *contractionists*.
2. A contractionary revolution must be distinguished from a class revolution. In a class revolution the fundamental issue is class oppression, and workers seek control of an expansionary economy. In a contractionary revolution the fundamental issue is overshoot, and contractionists seek to transform an expansionary economy into a contractionary economy. What the two have in common is that the capitalist class is the primary obstacle to the end being sought. Both therefore entail class struggle.
3. Because of their expansionary context, class revolutions are historically obsolete. They must be converted into contractionary revolutions, thereby retaining their class character while adding the necessary ecological component.
4. Because class revolutions are obsolete, socialism is no longer a valid goal. The current choice is therefore not between capitalism and socialism - this is a false dichotomy that ensnares progressive minds. The real choice is between capitalism and contractionary revolution. Socialism must be rejected for another reason: it fails to provide an economic logic to replace capitalism's logic. This has always made the system socially dangerous because economic decisions lacked transparency. It now makes the system ecologically dangerous because economic decisions could easily have expansionary results. Converting "socialism" to "ecosocialism" does not alter these facts.
5. Revolutions arise from *revolutionizing practice*: activities intended to achieve the revolutionary goal while transforming both society and the political actors themselves. In a class revolution this practice consists of strikes, demonstrations, etc. by workers.³ In a contractionary revolution it consists of efforts by contractionists to implement organic change within a capitalist context - that is, to assert the logic of sustainable well-being while the logic of capitalism still prevails. Revolutionizing practice stands in contrast to *reformism*, which seeks reforms as ends in themselves and thus avoids the necessary confrontation with capitalist logic.⁴
6. Revolutionizing practice is intended to achieve the following:
 - a. Engage the populace, thereby molding them into an active political force;
 - b. Produce reforms, thereby demonstrating the concrete meaning of organic change;
 - c. Persistently fail to produce reforms, thereby exposing the limitations of capitalist logic;
 - d. Provide contractionists with practical experience, thus allowing them to adjust their strategic approach;

- e. Shift legitimacy (social acceptance) away from the logic of capitalism and towards the logic of sustainable well-being;
 - f. Reveal how expansionists will respond to the contractionist challenge.
7. The coercive nature of a contractionary revolution will depend on the response of expansionists once legitimacy has moved decisively to the new logic. Where they are willing to relinquish power in accordance with the popular will, legal methods should be used. Where they refuse, the forcible seizure of power will be necessary and justified.

D. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

1. Successful political struggle requires effective leadership. A contractionary political organization (CPO) should therefore be established wherever the potential for economic transformation exists.
2. Numerous socialist organizations have been formed in the past to lead class struggles, and in some respects they provide instructive examples for CPOs. However, these organizations have also committed errors that must not be repeated. The most serious of these errors are the following:
 - a. **Ignoring human nature.** Capitalism has accentuated certain attributes of human nature, such as self-interest and aggression, and suppressed others, such as altruism and cooperation. However, these distortions do not imply that human nature itself - the patterns of thought and behavior that are rooted in our genetic make-up - does not exist.⁵ Ignoring these core patterns leads to the false conclusion that human beings are infinitely malleable, which can result in unjustified and unethical coercion.
 - b. **Seeking open-ended economic control.** Socialists seek economic control so that workers can reorganize the economy based on their class perspective. Such control is open-ended because it is not restricted by an explicit economic logic. Economic decision-makers cannot be permitted the liberty of interpreting and implementing a worldview; instead they must be tightly constrained by a set of transparent economic principles.
 - c. **Aiming for a specific economic structure.** Socialists aim for an economy where the means of production are publicly owned. However, there is no way for them or anyone else to know what ownership pattern will support a contractionary trajectory. This is a new project for humankind, and new solutions will be required. The structure of future economies cannot be predicted or pre-ordained, but must evolve organically based on the logic of sustainable well-being.
3. The purpose of a CPO is to provide the coordination and leadership required by contractionists to win the revolutionary struggle for economic transformation. A CPO must therefore understand the political issues surrounding legitimacy, economic control, and political power in its area. It must also develop a comprehensive social program to permit the effective governance of a region or country. If more than one CPO arises in

an area based on differences in their social programs or other factors, they will have to contend for contractionist support.

4. A CPO does not necessarily engage in elections, or seek victory if it does. Although elections can in some circumstances result in economic control, the electoral process should in most cases be used to disseminate contractionary ideas and to gauge the ecological and political maturity of the populace.
5. A CPO must be politically sophisticated enough to understand that expansionists will use whatever means are necessary to maintain the current trajectory. These means include not just the organs of the visible state - military, police, justice system, etc. - but also the hidden forces that sabotage capitalist democracy, pervert the mainstream media, assassinate threatening figures, and manufacture false-flag operations such as 9/11 to shape the public psyche and intensify social control.⁶ A CPO must try to prevent such onslaughts, and must react with clarity and determination should they occur.

E. ECONOMIC PRIORITIES

The following will likely be economic priorities for contractionists, both before and after the success of a contractionary revolution. These actions are derived from the logic of sustainable well-being as this is currently envisaged.

- a. To end the dominant role of profits in determining economic outcomes, the legal status of firms will be modified, their political influence curtailed, and their commercial freedom circumscribed.
- b. To end the relentless manipulation of consumers and the ecologically disastrous overproduction that results, advertising will be tightly restricted.
- c. To mitigate climate change, production will be severely curtailed for outputs that cause high greenhouse gas emissions and do not contribute significantly to objective well-being.
- d. To decrease the depletion of natural resources, production will be severely curtailed for outputs that require substantial resources and do not contribute significantly to objective well-being.
- e. To eliminate unemployment and enhance the work experience, the work-week will be immediately shortened. It will be shortened further as production declines.
- f. To eliminate unnecessary transportation and strengthen economic autonomy, trade will be minimized.
- g. To satisfy unmet needs, production will be increased for outputs where quantities are currently inadequate. Examples include child care, public transportation, and assistance for the elderly and disabled.
- h. To reduce inequality, restrictions will be placed on high incomes, and taxes will be levied on excessive wealth.

- i. To meet the economy's conceptual requirements, universities will shift their economics instruction away from expansionary thought and towards contractionary thought.⁷ Instruction in other fields, and at all educational levels, will be made compatible with the goals of overshoot reversal, global justice, and sustainable well-being.

F. DRIVERS OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

Capitalists are powerful and capitalism is deeply entrenched, but even the most imposing social forces are vulnerable as the wheel of history turns and opposition to the prevailing order swells. Under present conditions, the key drivers of revolutionary change are the following:

- **Ideas**
- **Leaders**
- **Events**

Ideas refer to strategic and economic concepts such as those outlined in this document. Leaders are individuals who have mastered these concepts and have strong organizational skills. Events are the ecological disasters that will inevitably occur and the political crises that will likely follow in their wake.

What is now necessary is for progressive thinkers to develop the proposed ideas until they are mature. Leaders must then arise to form the *contractionary movement* - organizations and initiatives that embody contractionary principles and embrace revolutionary change. When the galvanizing events occur, these movements must be transformed into contractionary revolutions that will move our economies beyond the ecocidal logic of capitalism and into the post-expansionary era of human development.

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Notes

¹ Governments can modify these outcomes, but they cannot alter them significantly without destroying the system's integrity.

² My analytical framework, the Economics of Needs and Limits (ENL), is intended as the starting point for this non-capitalist logic. ENL is based on the core realities of humankind and nature. It defines value, the central concept in economic thought, as the satisfaction of objective needs rather than subjective wants. Using this and other reformulated concepts, the framework addresses production, consumption, ecological constraints, resource utilization, population, and trade. ENL allows analysts to set economic objectives that balance human needs and natural limits so as to achieve global equity, well-being, and sustainability. For details, see the book *Needs and Limits: A New Economics for Sustainable Well-being (3rd edition)*. This is available free of charge at needsandlimits.org. Also available on the website are videos on ENL and a summary document.

³ This term is from Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (#3): "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionizing practice*." (Emphasis added.)

⁴ One tactic used by reformism in this avoidance is to narrow the target: corporations instead of capitalism, climate change instead of overshoot. The climate change distortion is particularly significant because it affects humankind's most serious ecological challenge. Reformism addresses climate change in isolation from overshoot, and focuses on technical fixes that preserve the current system. Revolutionizing practice addresses climate change as a high-priority issue for organic change, and pushes beyond the current system.

⁵ Marx disastrously claimed that, "... the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the ensemble of social relations." (*Theses on Feuerbach* - #6) This exclusive focus on social relations was an understandable reaction to the religious and philosophical idealism of the period (1845), but it ignores the biological underpinnings of our species. Marxists have never corrected this one-sidedness.

⁶ A useful overview of the ethical and scientific issues surrounding 9/11 can be found at: <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2010/09/24/ethical-reflections-on-the-911-controversy/all/1>. For an academic treatment of "state crimes against democracy" (SCAD), see the February, 2010 issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* at <http://abs.sagepub.com/content/53/6/783.abstract>. For some remarkable insights into the real world of political power, see Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513).

⁷ My proposed changes to the discipline of economics are outlined in the video "Revolutionizing Economic Thought" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04GzSjrm_7M.