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From Ability to Willingness: Freeing Socialism from Its Patriarchal Roots

MIKI KASHTAN

“In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual,

and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”

– Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program

WAS BORN IN TEL-AVIV IN 1956.

The Kibbutz movement, the most extensive voluntary experiment in socialist living I know of, was thriving despite still licking its wounds from the traumatic ideological wars in the early 1950s, as the horrors of Stalinism became more known. All through the 1960s, the years of my conscious childhood, I was in a kibbutz for several weeks every summer, connected with the “Society of Children” (children lived in their own houses based on age) through my cousin. I often witnessed forms of radical equality which I now know to have been enforced through ideological pressure. The degree to which the boundaries of the individual sphere were shrunk, such that more resided in the communal, made an indelible impression upon me. All the children wore the same clothes, taking from the laundry room whatever was in the clean pile, independently of what they brought to the laundry. Everyone ate together in the dining room. This was before Holocaust reparations and television destabilized the ethic of ideological self-sacrifice and passionate conviction that had been the hallmark of the movement. The changing geopolitical alignments post Six-Day War, and a host of other internal and external factors, eventually led to the near dissolution of the Kibbutz movement. Although close to 300 kibbutzim still exist, the overwhelming majority of them are fundamentally privatized and individualized.

Not too long afterwards, starting when I was about sixteen, I implicitly adopted the view of human nature and of life that makes capitalism justifiable. I felt active disdain for the idea that people could be motivated to contribute for any reason other than self-interest. I saw it as naïve, possibly dangerous. I was also slightly misanthropic myself, believing that the best I could hope for personally would be to find a few decent human beings I could trust, along

with myself, and no one and nothing else. I also believed that, given how immoral and uncaring we were collectively (with the exceptions above), what had happened in history is the only thing that could have happened, and that it emerged, naturally, from who we were.

I was critical enough politically to choose to leave Israel in 1983 so as to not have things done to Palestinians in my name. Socially and philosophically, however, I remained bound to my cynical views until feminism entered my life in 1985. The results were a sudden and ongoing revamping of much that I previously believed. I voraciously read *Beyond Power* by Marilyn French and soon thereafter *The Chalice and the Blade* by Riane Eisler. Patriarchy revealed itself to me as a series of events, not an unavoidable permanent reality. I became acquainted with life before patriarchy, and, for the first time ever, could begin envisioning a world beyond patriarchy.

SOCIALISM AND FEMINISM

Though I had been periodically immersed in a hotbed of socialist experimenting, I didn't have any real understanding about socialism, nor deep thinking about any of the issues raised, until well after I started wearing the feminist badge. This left me with clarity that no amount of socialist revolution, by itself, would undo the inherent domination built into relations between men and women, between adults and children, and between different groups of people, such as those clumped together under the dubious category of race. By the time I was working on my dissertation, whose focus was challenging the centrality of reason and rationality in western civilization, I knew enough to know that Marx, despite his profound critique of capitalism, was also at the same time a product of the Enlightenment, and he neither

theorized nor questioned putting men's activities at the center of analysis and according no significance to the experience and activities of women. In some fundamental way, he positioned women's work and relationships outside of the sphere of historical analysis, as if they neither influence nor are shaped by the unfolding of history. One thing he misses as a result is the possibility of understanding the origins of gifting within mothering, as Genevieve Vaughan has since done.

The world of his future is an "association of free producers." Those producers are men. No women, no children are part of that producer paradise, even though in his days women and children often worked in factories. Without the women and the children, it would be hard to create concrete models of how needs can be attended to, models that are simple and intuitive within Vaughan's understanding. Mothering, according to her, is based on other-orientation, through which need in one (child initially) spontaneously generates willingness in the other (mother initially). Except in unusual circumstances, (or, more recently under conditions of capitalism which has convinced many women otherwise, to the detriment of babies worldwide) there's never been a reason to coerce mothers to breastfeed their babies. Were Marx to take seriously the activities and experiences of women, and even of children, he may well have found pathways to the free future he envisioned that didn't require coercion along the way. As far as I can tell, there's never been an experience in which communities based on freedom and significant relationships of care emerged through coercion. If we sow coercion, we are unlikely to harvest freedom.

ABILITY AND NEEDS

How is it that coercion came into being in an environment oriented towards a free future? In

my understanding of this very central question, way too many factors have contributed to this tragic result. Here, in this article, I want to focus on only two of those factors, both of which are present within the innocent-sounding and so often repeated sentence within the quote that opens this article: "From each according to his *ability*, to each according to his *need*."

How ability and need are determined, and especially how much trust fuels that determination, is key to whether freedom and community flourish or die. When individuals are free, within their communities, to assess their own needs and ability, and have those assessments trusted within and beyond the community, resources can flow effortlessly and efficiently. Given the rampant mistrust that capitalism

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emerges from and which it deepens, ability and need have so far required an external authority that would determine them. Both in the immense socialist states and in the kibbutz movement, this meant lack of freedom (even while some vitally important basic needs have been attended to, in important ways, better than in capitalist societies).

This reality has left me with enormous questions: What will it take to envision, and then to create, a future "Beloved Community" in which coercion is truly absent? How far can the principles of maternal giving be extended into actual organizing principles of an entire society? And how will we ever reclaim the necessary trust in ourselves, each other, and life after millennia of patriarchy?



Children on Kibbutz in Israel circa 1934. (public domain)

I don't know the answer to any of these questions, nor do I believe that anyone else does. What I do know is that the more we envision boldly; the more we challenge within ourselves the deeper assumptions of scarcity, separation, and powerlessness that patriarchy rests on and capitalism intensifies; and the more we experiment, individually and collectively, with living *as if* the world we envision is already here, the more likely we are to answer these questions and create at least small pockets of a livable future.

Having engaged in all of these endeavors for years, one principle has emerged for me as foundational both to the future and to the path that leads to it. I call it the principle of willingness. In the most minimal substitution, this principle would result in changing one word only in Marx's original: "ability" will be replaced with "willingness." And removing the word "his" would go some way toward addressing the invisibility of women's work and contributions. However, this minimalist

reframing is insufficient for one more reason, since it still leaves the question of how to assess need. A broader reframing, and a principle that is already in use in the work and learning communities I am a part of, is: resources flow from where they exist to where they are needed based on willingness. Or, only that for which there is wholehearted willingness will be done. And whenever we discover that we have slipped, or don't know how to live these principles, we aim to mourn and deepen our search for strategies that do fit the principle.

In my book *Reweaving Our Human Fabric: Working Together to Create a Nonviolent Future*, I include a detailed vision of a future where this principle, and a few others, are core features of human life and where money and coercion are absent. Because of how little I've found in our current way of living that matches this vision, I primarily offer it in the form of twelve fictional stories that describe—through following a day in the life of twelve characters positioned in that future—how this principle

applies in care for and distribution of natural resources, in coordination of transportation, in workflow, in food production, in garbage collection, and more.¹ This is not a utopian, conflict-free vision. Rather, it's a world made up of human beings like us, with their relationship challenges, workplace difficulties, conflicts over resources, and more. What's different is how things are done, what the priorities are, and how the challenges are attended to when full collaboration and togetherness are the norm. Even when rare and extreme situations result in people being locked up to protect safety, such "prisons" would be staffed by people with exceptional relational capacity who would lovingly support those who are there while they recover from whatever led to the acts of violence that landed them there, from the impact on them of knowing what they have done, and the impact of that on those they had harmed, including engaging directly with the people they had harmed when possible, and from the impact of being locked up. In this imagined and very real-seeming environment, the very social structures and systems embed principles that put needs and willingness at the center.

TRANSFORMING DEMAND: PUTTING NEEDS AT THE CENTER

I once engaged in a two-hour discussion with two friends about the first page of *Das Kapital*. What we got out of it is a simple understanding of the seductive power of capitalism: the illusion that if we only have enough money, then no one can tell us what to do, and we are free.

One of the complexities that many cite for why a needs-based approach may be fraught is that it's difficult to actually know what we need. It is much easier to do the sleight of hand that economics does, which is about reducing needs to demand in the fundamental equation that

governs our lives. This reduction involves two parts, both of which create unfreedom. One is the deliberate manipulation of our emotions and desires that capitalism depends on, and the other is the singular role of money as the primary pathway to meeting needs.

The unfreedom created by the former mechanism rests on planting within us a sense of lack and hunger for "more," while at the same time making market-based solutions appear as the only ones available, and thus making them ever more desirable. In such an environment, it is extremely difficult to know what we really want, and even more difficult to know why we want it.

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The unfreedom created by the latter is perhaps more obvious: no matter how well we know our needs, if we don't have access to money that would allow us to convert our needs into a market demand, we won't be able to get our needs met. This is because capitalism grows the economy by severing us from direct relationship with nature and with our communities and leaving us alone and isolated from each other, competing instead of collaborating, and, usually, in permanent anxiety about having enough money, or more money, to be able to attend to our needs.

In my work with thousands of people around the world, people consistently find more free-

dom after connecting with the “why” of what we want: our fundamental human needs, *before* any market-based solution and capacity to attend to the needs are present. If we are ever to create a world in which people assess their needs and communicate about them as part of new resource flow systems, this internal freedom is vital for us to be able to function within diminishing resources on a finite planet with a continually growing human population.

TRANSFORMING SUPPLY: DISCOVERING THE JOY OF GENEROSITY

One of the other arguments made against the feasibility of free and connected resource flow is the view of human nature that feeds and justifies our current systems, concisely summarized by the term *homo economicus*: that we are all ultimately seeking the narrowest possible definition of self-interest. According to this view, neither care for others nor care for the whole are human motivators. As Adam Smith said: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”² Simply put: we give in order to receive.

If we want to transcend the exchange paradigm and restore flow, we will need to uncouple giving from receiving, so we can give without the expectation of receiving, and receive without the obligation to give. In a full gift economy, which acts as a feminist alternative to patriarchal socialism, giving is based on availability of resources released into the flow with generosity and willingness, and receiving is based on the presence of a need.

Marshall Rosenberg, the person who brought Nonviolent Communication to the world, often



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invoked the image of giving “with the joy of a little child feeding a hungry duck.”³ Every time I heard him use it in a workshop, a ripple of resonance extended through the room: we easily recognize that free flow, and the attendant joy. What makes for that joy? In one word: freedom. We can only access the joy of giving, the true fountain of abundant generosity, when we are free *not* to do it. Given patriarchal socialization, which is based on shame and obedience, such freedom is rare.⁴ Instead, we are all too often motivated by constraints, incentives, obligations, fear, shame, desire for reward, or the like. Even when not, we fall into habits, respond to impulse, or react to what others do. Many people, when I name this entire laundry list of motivations, realize to their discomfort that little of what they do is fully motivated from within, from clarity about their clearest and deepest needs, their purpose, and their values. I’ve already mentioned that the capitalist market economy interferes with our capacity to receive, and to then attend to our needs outside the market through making requests in relationship with others. As with the difficulty in uncoupling receiving, here, too, patriarchy, through the mechanism of internalizing shame, obedience, and control, tampers with our ca-

capacity to give by creating conditions where we either give out of obligation or refuse to give out of reaction to the inner pressure to give.

Like the journey to full, unconditional receiving, reclaiming that initial joy, with the capacity to give from simple connection with a need we are meeting in another, is a path of liberation. All that's needed to get the power of it is to take a moment to remember a time in which we gave unconditionally, without any expectation to receive. Whenever I ask people to do this, I see smiles spreading across the room. There's no reason for us not to slow down just enough to notice that source of goodwill, and act from it, against any internalized voice that judges it as being taken advantage of. As the best antidote to resentment about giving too much, somewhere along the path we need to also find and care for our actual and true capacity, which becomes easier the more we are able to recognize our needs, and thereby also honor our limits.

TRANSFORMING EXCHANGE: FINDING WHOLEHEARTED WILLINGNESS

The next bit of the puzzle of how to restore flow is about finding the way to match resources to needs. This is where willingness emerges as a potent principle, replacing both the supply and demand graphs and notions such as value, deserve, and fairness.

These notions, deeply embedded in our basic orientation to any distribution of resources, keep us tethered to market economies. What we call 'value' is a placeholder for what we care about in terms of our own essential needs, what we hope will attend to them. This notion allows us, if we have the requisite money, to rationalize our choice to exchange it for something we want. What we call 'deserve' is a

placeholder for need, and allows us to accept dramatic inequalities that create hierarchies of whose needs count. What we call 'fairness' is a placeholder for our care for the whole. It's the hardest one to shift, because the shift implies acknowledging that we can never force fairness anyway, and also that insisting on fairness contributes to conflict and war more often than it contributes to mutual understanding and collaboration. The only alternative to fairness I know is focusing on what's possible instead of what's fair.

I see wholehearted willingness, which leaves us without resentment, which often feels magical and liberating, and rarely is actively sought, as one of the keys into a future that works. It is what makes it possible to shift from the either/or of domination vs. compromise that rules the world of collaboration and negotiation to the possibility of full integration presciently discussed by Mary Parker Follett over 100 years ago as she researched and coined the terms power over and power with. Full integration happens, reliably, when we take into consideration all the known needs, all the known and predicted potential impacts, and all the known resources, and when we hold all this information in togetherness with all stakeholders to any particular resource allocation puzzle. What then emerges is a solution that finds everyone in a place of willingness. This solution may not be anyone's *preference*, and yet everyone may be willing to agree to it precisely because it attends to the needs within the resources and with the least amount of undesired impacts.

ZOOMING OUT TO A WORLD IN CRISIS

Given how difficult it is, in our current system, to exit the market logic of exchange, it's no wonder that most of us, most of the time, feel most comfortable in transactions where

the giving and the receiving cancel each other fully; where no one owes anyone anything. Leaving it to individuals alone to create this transformation will fail for as long as our current patriarchal systems continue to reinforce the consciousness of scarcity, separation, and powerlessness through how they operate, through socialization, and through narratives that are replicated everywhere.

Patriarchy birthed this consciousness of scarcity, separation, and powerlessness and embedded it within every system that has been invented since, ranging from states to markets, from legal to educational systems, and from economic to cultural spheres. Ultimately, it is this consciousness that I believe is driving our current escalating and intersecting global crises, because we've been on a collision course of trying to control life and ourselves, interfering with flows, converting natural abundance to artificial excess coupled with manufactured scarcity, extracting beyond replenishment, and pitting us against each other in endless wars.

I don't believe that individual solutions to systemic problems are feasible. At the same time, like just about everyone else I read, watch, or talk with, envisioning systemic change radical enough to reset the patriarchal paradigm and gentle enough so that a gradual shift can happen while averting collapse is currently beyond my imagination's capacity.⁵ I know this: all previous empires have collapsed; none voluntarily; none while seeing what was coming. I see no reason to believe that the current empire(s) will have any other fate. The question for me is not whether or not system change will happen. It's only whether we might find a way to make it produce less suffering than it's likely to produce, than it's already producing in vast sections of the world. Catastrophes related to climate change, political anxieties, migration-related horrors, and more are already the present for millions of people. I don't see any

scenario under which we fully avoid mass suffering; only some still possible forks in the road in terms of just how much suffering, and how much of life will survive.

THE CHALLENGE

Patriarchy and capitalism have won some deeply significant battles that make any change immensely daunting. Their combination has resulted in the reduction of work to jobs; learning to schools; care to customer service; creativity to innovation; governance to nation states; Earth's abundance to property; needs to rights and to consumption; and sharing/flow to exchange and accumulation.

We have all but forgotten the commons as an organizing principle of relationship with life and community; collaboration based on mutual care in attending to needs as a primary mode of engagement with other humans; trust and participation as a way of making decisions; and immersion in all these activities as an approach to learning and creativity.

Our institutions, both political and economic, are reinforcing scarcity, separation, and powerlessness, and keep most of us now, most of the time, in some baseline activation of our survival mode of fight, flight, or freeze. Choice and collaboration are dramatically less available in such conditions. When we create movements, we often reproduce the dominant forms of command and control vertically and competition horizontally.

Meanwhile large scale applications of socialism, rooted in the luminous promise of a brighter future, have failed to engage with its patriarchal roots. For the most part, they have remained beholden to controlling nature and to industrial, extractive economies, albeit based on state planning instead of profit maximization. Some needs have been met better in

socialist milieus, and others less. And we have not gotten closer to restoring our capacity to live in harmony with life while caring for each other within the commons.

This all means to me that if we want to have a different outcome from one more version of patriarchal systems, we will be called upon to change how we work for change, not only what change we are working for. We cannot plant tomatoes and harvest corn.

PREFIGURATIVE COMMUNITIES

For this reason, I am focusing my own energy on supporting myself, individuals, and communities I am part of in transforming patterns of scarcity, separation, and powerlessness into flow, togetherness, and freedom. If not all of us perish; if enough of life survives; there will be an ever growing need to collaborate. In the largest experiment I've been part of co-creating in the last two years—an online community we have named Nonviolent Global Liberation—we are continually experimenting, in particular, with the principles I have outlined in this article. We are getting better and better at not doing anything out of fear or obligation, and allowing things not to happen at all—we call it “the void”—rather than artificially and resentfully propping up systems and agreements for which there isn't really enough willingness. We see miracles of people stepping into roles we didn't imagine they would, and we have heartache where precious projects languish for lack of wholehearted capacity. Both are part of life. Both are part of the difficult journey of recovering from our addiction to “predict and control” patterns.

Between individuals and global systems we find communities, and my hope lies precisely there: in the revival of the commons, in the growing awareness that collaboration is key,

and that facilitated conversations and wise systems support willing collaboration and flow without requiring billions of us to heal from trauma and learn how to collaborate individually. I feel nourished by the many vibrant and imperfect experiments, large and small, sprouting all over the planet, that provide living evidence that more collaboration and more flow are indeed part of our makeup. I am especially heartened to see how much becomes possible after collapse, as is evidenced by what was unfolding in Rojava until the recent attacks on it by Turkey. Rojava became an autonomous zone within ravaged Syria, focusing on bottom-up and feminist governance that came into existence in a failed state. I am heartbroken and tragically not surprised by the efforts to undermine everything the people of Rojava have built. Still, the future is not yet written, and I trust that having faith in possibility can only support us all, wherever we are, as we remain part of the teams that are writing it. ●



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Footnotes

[1] Three of those stories are available online at <http://thefearless-heart.org/store/reweaving-our-human-fabric/>.

[2] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of the Nations*, Book 1, Chapter 2.

[3] <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1185025>.

[4] See the article “Parenting without Obedience” by Miki and Armina Kashtan, in *Tikkun*, Winter 2019

[5] In his newest book, *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*, Rabbi Michael Lerner puts forth such a path and vision. You can read more at www.tikkun.org/revlove.