

Reflections on 50 Years of Radical Political Economy

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Abstract

I examine first how radical political economy (RPE) has evolved over the last five decades, as the overall political climate in the United States has shifted increasingly to the right. I explore how this political shift, as well as new developments within mainstream economics, have altered the focus of much of RPE and the activities of many of its practitioners. I then offer suggestions to radical political economists as to the future orientation of RPE.

JEL Classification: B 24; B 51

Keywords

radical, political economy, capitalism

I. Introduction

I would like first to thank the organizers for inviting me to deliver this year's David M. Gordon Memorial Lecture. It is a great honor.

To my mind, what has most basically characterized radical political economists since the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) was founded in the late 1960s is the determination to combine economic analysis with political activism on behalf of fundamental human values such as democracy, equality, and solidarity. We want our work not only to meet the standards of good economic analysis, but also to be useful to political forces struggling to bring about a better society. We see our teaching and our research not only as an effort to generate more understanding of the world around us, but also as part of an active struggle to contribute to the advancement of human well-being.

In all these respects, David Gordon was an exemplary radical political economist. Not only was he one of the foremost practitioners of radical political economy in North America. Much more than most of us, he was also continuously engaging with working people, with community activists, and with the media, in a concerted effort to improve understanding of the world around us and to promote our values in the political arena.

If I have any comparative advantage in speaking to this audience, it is my advanced age: my professional life as an economist has spanned the life of URPE as an organization. So it seems

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appropriate that I should look back over the past half-century to examine the evolution of radical political economy, and to consider where we should be heading in the future.

2. How Things Looked in the Late 1960s

In the world of the 1960s: the Soviet Union had overcome the worst of Stalinism; under Khrushchev, and among the new generation of *shestidesiatniki*,¹ it was becoming somewhat more open economically and more liberal politically, at least until the crackdown on the liberalizing Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia. China had pioneered a new kind of socialist economy rooted in the peasantry, and the Cultural Revolution appeared to herald a much more egalitarian socioeconomic system. Yugoslavia was prospering under a form of market socialism that suggested a promising middle way between capitalism and socialism. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had carried out a successful revolution against the forces of U.S. imperialism, and Cuba was serving as an inspiring example of a how a third world country could throw off the colonial or neocolonial yoke and develop a revolutionary left-wing alternative.

In the United States, the “New Left” movement had developed a great deal of momentum, and college campuses in particular became sites of increasing political activism, first in support of civil rights and opposition to nuclear arms, next over larger issues of democracy and civic participation, as exemplified by the 1962 Port Huron statement and the rise of SDS. Key developments include also the “free speech” movement on the UC-Berkeley campus in 1964, and the teach-ins in opposition to the Vietnam War, started at the U. of Michigan in 1965. Then the ramping up of the draft of soldiers to fight the Vietnam War generated growing opposition to the Johnson administration and to the whole U.S. establishment; the “Black Power” movement stimulated further radicalism among whites; and women began to organize forcefully against sexism and patriarchy.

This was the context in which, on university campuses, significant numbers of undergraduate and graduate students as well as some faculty – mostly in the social sciences and the humanities – took increasingly radical stances against the mainstream of their academic disciplines, forming dissident groups to discuss and publicize the need for a radical re-orientation of mainstream thinking, seen as a bulwark of an unjust society. URPE was just one of many New Left academic organizations formed at the time, and one of the few to survive to the present time.

The two major political parties were seen as complicit in promoting authoritarianism and injustice, so not only conservatism but also liberalism was rejected. Enthusiasm grew for revolutionary change and a socialist alternative to American capitalism, inspired by the examples of China and Cuba.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that most URPE members sought to develop a radical political economy that would constitute a distinct alternative to mainstream economics – dominated as it was by a “neoclassical synthesis” of micro- and macro-economics – that would draw heavily on the work of Karl Marx and his followers, and that would drop the pretense of political neutrality and call for economic analysis in support of fundamental social change. To paraphrase Marx: “the point is not just to understand the world, but to change it!”

Indeed, most of us expected that revolutionary change was actually possible in the United States within our lifetime. As Howard Wachtel has observed² about the early years of URPE’s formation, “this was the sixties, after all, and we thought anything was possible.”

¹The term means “those of the 1960s”; it refers to the generation of influential Soviet intellectuals and Communist Party leaders who in that decade advocated liberalization of the Soviet system.

²In his remarks at URPE’s 40th anniversary celebration at the ASSA meetings in New Orleans, January 3, 2008; available online at: <http://www.tni.org/es/archives/act/18573>.

3. Radical Political Economy (RPE) in its First Decade

The word *radical* in RPE was meant to denote both a radically different perspective on what constitutes a good society, and the importance of understanding the deep roots – as opposed to surface appearances – of economic phenomena. The term *political economy* emphasized the embeddedness of economic phenomena in a much broader social, political, and historical context.

Some radical political economists³ used Marx's own economic analysis, as set out mainly in *Das Kapital*, working within the framework of his labor theory of value and his theory of the inevitable tendency of the rate of profit to fall, leading ultimately and inevitably to a collapse of capitalism.

More of us saw ourselves as “neo-Marxian,” drawing somewhat eclectically on Marx's political and philosophical writings for an overall framework in which to analyze capitalist and alternative economic systems, and making use of mainstream economic tools as well as insights from Marx and later Marxist social scientists and philosophers. We rejected orthodox Marxism and were influenced as much by Marx's work on alienation as by his work on the economics of capitalism.

All of us sought to draw a sharp line between the approach of radical economists and that of liberal as well as conservative mainstream economists. Liberal Keynesian reforms were seen as inadequate responses to the severe defects of capitalist economies; such “non-revolutionary reforms” were to be rejected in favor of “revolutionary reforms,” if not revolution itself.

Radical economists undertook research in many fields within economics; the research was often more interdisciplinary than that of mainstream economists, drawing on sociological, political, historical, even psychological analysis; and it often analyzed phenomena that standard economic theorizing had difficulty explaining, e.g. situations where the logic of individual self-interested behavior and free-market equilibrium fails.

We typically worked on issues where the functioning of a capitalist economy was found wanting, seeking to show how fundamental changes in economic and political institutions would be necessary for improving outcomes. Explicitly or implicitly, we called for a new socialist economy.

Some of our contributions were made to major mainstream economics journals, but more often our work would appear in specialized journals focusing on issues like labor relations, industrial organization, and modes of economic thought, or in a variety of lesser-known journals open to different kinds of political-economic approaches, most importantly for us, the *Review of Radical Political Economics*.

What united all radical economists was the conviction that capitalism is a highly deficient economic system and that our work as economists should be helpful to movements seeking to oppose the political powers-that-be and ultimately to establish an alternative truly democratic, and truly participatory, system. We envisaged a revolutionary transformation of American capitalism into a distinctively new form of socialism.

Most radical economists identified as political activists, working with left-wing groups, speaking out on economic issues of the day; and we tended to write articles and books for the general public and/or for students – rather than articles for specialized journals – with a view to influencing public discussion and understanding of economic issues from a radical perspective.

4. How Different Things Look Now

In the world of 2014: the Soviet Union is history, as are the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Some of us had hoped and expected that the collapse of Soviet power would lead to the establishment of hybrid systems including significant elements of socialism as well as

³For simplification, I will hereafter drop the adjective *political*.

capitalism. But successor states in that part of the world have rejected socialism and adopted capitalism, in one form or another, and their economies have been increasingly integrated into the global capitalist economy. China continues to call its economic system socialist, but it operates as a capitalist economy with a substantial public sector, fully integrated into the global capitalist economy, combining rapid economic growth with burgeoning inequality and environmental destruction; and it remains profoundly undemocratic. Yugoslavia no longer exists, and there is hardly a trace of market socialism in any of its successor states. Cuba has an economy that resembles in many ways its earlier socialist model, but it has been gradually opening up to private market-based activity in an effort to overcome persistent economic difficulties, it has depended on a good deal of outside economic aid (previously from the Soviet Union, more recently from Venezuela), and it remains profoundly undemocratic. Venezuela under Chavez introduced some elements of a socialist economic model, while preserving a fairly robust political democracy; but its economy has been weakening and its ability to maintain its socialist elements is much in doubt in the post-Chavez era, as its economic conditions have deteriorated.

In the United States, the entire left – new, old, and even social-democratic – is greatly weakened at the national level, though elements of the left remain strong in certain pockets of the country, *e.g.* cities like New York and San Francisco, and university towns like Amherst, Ann Arbor, and Berkeley.

The year 2008 ushered in the most serious capitalist economic crisis since the Great Depression, marked by demonstrably irresponsible – and in some cases criminal – behavior on the part of major financial corporations and wealthy elites, leading to high un- and under-employment, declining real wages, incomes and benefits for much of the population, and rapidly growing inequality. Even those few radical economists who foresaw the economic crisis would never have thought that the current neoliberal “social structure of accumulation” (SSA) could survive it. We would have expected a huge challenge to the previously ruling authorities, and a period of civil unrest, if not chaos, leading to fundamental change. How many of us would have predicted that the popular rage against the perpetrators of the economic crisis – Wall Street gamblers and global financiers, government deregulators and non-regulators, *et al.* – would in the United States be harnessed mainly by the right (via the Tea Party) rather than by the left? And how many of us would now confidently predict that we will emerge from the current crisis with a new economic and political order more congenial to our values and our hopes?

The fact is that the ongoing economic crisis has generated little in the way of popular revolt, and it has done little to empower the left. Though it did spawn an Occupy Movement that focused attention on the myriad inequities of contemporary life in the United States and garnered a lot of attention for a time, the movement’s impact on national economic policy has been minimal. The political strength of pro-market and anti-government forces has been growing for four decades, and it has hardly been dented by the crisis. As economic inequality has grown and grown, and as restrictions on the power of money in politics have been diminishing, the major political parties have moved significantly to the right on economic issues. The Democrats have become a party of the center – *e.g.* adopting previously Republican policies on issues like health care – in which progressives struggle to keep policy from moving further to the right. The Republicans have become a party solely of the right, convinced that government is much more of a problem than a solution, in which ideologues keep pulling economic policy further toward the extreme right.⁴ And over the last few decades in almost all the other major economies of the world, inequality has grown, the welfare state has become weaker, and economic policy has shifted rightward.

⁴As I have been reminded by Kurt Schuler (in e-mail correspondence), there are also significant respects in which the political climate in the United States has moved to the left since the 1960s, notably on social/cultural issues such as autonomy for women, civil rights for racial minorities, LGBT rights, and tolerance for marijuana usage. On the first two of these issues, however, some of the earlier progress has recently been eroding as U.S. courts and many state governments have trended further to the right.

Consider what has happened from the perspective of SSA analysis, an important contribution of RPE, in which David Gordon played a pioneering role.⁵ SSA analysts describe the historical evolution of capitalism in terms of a succession of long waves characterized by SSAs. Each SSA is born out of a major economic crisis, then ushers in a period of prosperity, only to succumb later on to contradictions leading to a new major crisis. The most widespread accounts chart a progression of SSAs beginning with a raw form of capitalism, followed by “corporate capitalism,” then “regulated capitalism,” and – emerging in the 1980s – “neoliberal” capitalism.⁶ What is striking in this series of SSAs is that the most recent one is the first to represent a historical retreat, rather than a historical advance, with respect to the effort to steer markets toward collectively-determined social and economic goals. Neoliberal capitalism is simply corporate capitalism expanded from a national to an international scale. Up until 1980 we could look back and see capitalism evolving in a direction consistent with a long-wave evolution toward a more socialistic economic structure. The history of the last 30 years has been one of regression away from any form of socialism.

5. Radical Political Economy in Recent Decades

In the context of the world-wide rightward trends noted above, it is not surprising that RPE has evolved considerably away from its initial rejection of mainstream economics – liberal as well as conservative – and from its rejection of the possibility of reforming capitalism for the better.

True, RPE has continued to distinguish itself from mainstream economics by a greater focus on historical context, on conflict between – and exercise of power by – different groups and classes, and on all the forces that make what is profitable diverge from what is efficient and/or desirable. And radical economists have done excellent work on a variety of important topics: to name a few, the rise in inequality since the late 1970s, the “labor process,” labor market segmentation, patriarchy, racism, long-wave cycles of boom and crisis, and ecological limits on economic growth. The *Review of Radical Political Economics* remains – some 45 years after its founding as a major URPE project – the single most important outlet for work in RPE. But radical economists have increasingly published also in mainstream journals, as well as in specialized journals often critical of the mainstream, such as *Feminist Economics*, *Ecological Economics*, and the *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*.

Despite its initial ambitions, however, RPE has not developed a coherent new analytical framework or paradigm for addressing economic problems. And, like other heterodox economic approaches that are in various ways critical of mainstream economic theory and practice, RPE is rather eclectic in using a variety of analytical tools in its effort to counter the right-wing trend in economic thinking and to develop progressive alternatives to right-wing economic policies.

We should recognize also that over time a significant number of mainstream economists have embraced and developed ideas that are close to those of radical economists. For example, there is much convergence of RPE work with elements of mainstream economics in areas such as “efficiency wages” and their implications for unemployment (Shapiro and Stiglitz 1984), the consequences of asymmetric information as between buyers and sellers (Akerlof 1970; Spence 1973), game theory analysis of bargaining in conflict situations (Binmore 1990), and “animal spirits” affecting investor behavior and the macroeconomy (Akerlof and Shiller 2009). Such developments – often recognized in Nobel Prize awards – have taken place in spite of the general rightward trend in mainstream economic thinking, especially as reflected in the way economics

⁵See Gordon (1978, 1980) for his early work on long waves and stages of accumulation.

⁶See Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf (1983, 1991) for comprehensive works applying SSA analysis to the U.S. economy; more recent work in SSA analysis can be found in Kotz, McDonough, and Reich (1994) and Kotz, Reich, and McDonough (2010).

is taught to undergraduate students, which has become increasingly favorable to market outcomes and hostile to government involvement in the economy.

The convergence of much RPE work with new elements of mainstream economics has led to sharp critiques from those radical economists who remain more closely aligned with traditional Marxist economics, seen as incompatible with any form of mainstream economics. URPE has always encompassed both types of radical economists, but the division between the two groups has become sharper, involving both economic methodology and political perspective, *i.e.* whether progress can be evolutionary, in alliance with liberals, or must be revolutionary, in opposition to both liberals and conservatives.

In spite of the extent to which much of RPE has converged with new elements of mainstream economics, radical economists nowadays get more attention from professors and students in sociology departments than from those in economics departments. RPE has arguably stimulated more attention to issues of social injustice, inequality, discrimination, market failure, and economic crisis; but the mainstream economists working on these issues do not draw much on contributions by radical economists.

So what has RPE actually accomplished? Obviously it has not moved American political discourse and economic policy to the left; but that failure can hardly be charged to radical economists. Many of us have decided to work in liberal policy-oriented organizations, in part, no doubt, because fewer opportunities are available within academia. In turn, not a few prominent liberal economists – such as Joe Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, Jeffrey Sachs, and (David's brother) Robert Gordon – have become considerably more outspoken, and indeed more radical, in their critique of contemporary U.S. capitalism, joining radical economists in fighting against the policy hegemony of right-wing economists and Wall Street bankers.

Moreover, there has been considerable growth of RPE-based or -influenced research and outreach institutions. The majority of radical economists now seek to link their work in economics to movements for evolutionary social change, or efforts to defend the achievements of past such movements against assault by much-strengthened right-wing forces. Particularly important is the activist role many radical economists are playing in policy-oriented research institutions and media outlets, carrying out and disseminating progressive policy research. Many of these organizations were founded by radical economists, some of them teachers and some of them grad students in colleges and universities where RPE has been taught over the past decades. They have not built a new economic paradigm, but they combine progressive values and sound economic techniques to weigh in on ongoing economic policy debates, *e.g.* over living wage ordinances.

Prominent examples of left-wing organizations pursuing these aims are: the Center for Popular Economics (Amherst, MA), Dollars & Sense (Somerville, MA), the Political Economy Research Institute (UMass, Amherst), the Center for Economic Policy Research (Washington, DC), and the Global Development and Environment Institute (Tufts University). Radical economists – mostly Ph.D.s from schools with political economy programs or graduate fields – can also be found in significant numbers in more mainstream liberal organizations, such as: the Economic Policy Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Institute for Policy Studies, the AFL-CIO, the New America Foundation, and the Institute for New Economic Thinking. All of these activities cannot match the right-wing think tanks and media outlets in funding, outreach, or influence, but they do provide some important counterweight to the dominance of the right in U.S. public discourse on economic issues.

I would argue that the most important contributions of radical economists in recent decades have been the following: first, teaching economics to large numbers of undergraduate and smaller numbers of graduate students in ways that encourage them not only to understand economic phenomena in a broad context, but also to see the reduction of inequality and injustice as a compelling moral issue and the restructuring of economic life along more humane lines as a major goal; second, founding and populating progressive economic research and outreach institutions

(as detailed above), thereby strengthening the political forces seeking to bring about progressive social and economic change.

What distinguishes most of us now from mainstream economists is less that we find different economic issues worth researching, writing, and teaching about, or that we use quite different analytical methods in doing so. It is more that we approach research, writing, and teaching on these issues not simply as an intellectual challenge, but as a challenge to make things better, which requires political activism. This means that we must not only understand how economic systems actually work, but that we must also – and this is a much harder task – figure out how to change economic institutions and policies in ways that will enhance human well-being.

6. The Short-run Need for a Coalition-oriented Approach

Precisely because we want our work to be useful to political forces struggling to change society for the better, we radical economists must continue to take into account the extent to which the realities of the political environment in which we are now working are unfavorable to the left.

I believe we must recognize that a successful revolutionary uprising against the capitalist order is inconceivable, inside the United States or in most of the rest of the world, in the foreseeable future. The establishment of any kind of truly socialist system – whether by revolution or evolution – hardly seems possible in the coming decades in any major country. The real battle now – at least in the more affluent nations, if not everywhere else – is not to bring about some form of socialism to replace capitalism, but to establish or to maintain a form of social-democratic capitalism. This has been achieved to a considerable extent in Northern Europe, though even there in recent decades the achievement has been suffering some erosion.

It is therefore only realistic for the left to stop looking at the world's economic options in terms of capitalism vs. socialism, and instead to recognize that there is a fairly wide range of alternative possibilities within a capitalist market system. Some of these are far superior to the current U.S. model, and within reach of a left-wing movement whose development is conceivable in the United States in the coming decades. But to make any progress, we need to understand the political context in which we are operating.

Consider what the left has and has not achieved over the last four decades. On issues on which the working classes have been pitted against management, and on issues on which the poor have been pitted against the rich, we have been regressing. Workers and unions have lost a great deal of ground to owners and managers, unemployment and under-employment has risen, the gap between the poor and the rich has widened enormously, and poverty and insecurity have become more and more widespread.

The only issues on which significant progress has been made toward the achievement of left-wing goals are issues for which the primary beneficiaries include not only members of the working classes, or the poor more generally, but issues where a significant portion of the beneficiaries are relatively well off. The reduction of sexism in the workplace and in American life more generally has benefited well-to-do women at least as much as the poorly off. Likewise the reduction of racism, and the advance toward equal LGBT rights, have benefited well-to-do minorities probably more than the less well-off. In all these cases, the political support of large numbers of the well-off has been crucial in bringing about progressive change.

So in fighting to rebuild and strengthen the social-democratic elements of U.S. capitalism, against the powerful forces opposing us, we must recognize the need for allies. Starting within our own profession, I think there are many liberal mainstream economists who share our views on the threat of the right and on some basic elements of a more humane society, though most are reluctant to become activists. We should work to get these relatively reasonable folks to see that they need to get more involved in and better at informing public discourse, if we are to prevent the right-wing crazies from completely taking over. As basic economic verities are routinely

rejected by powerful politicians, even activism-averse mainstream economists can surely see the need not to leave policy-making to the politicians, but to take a stand against unreason.

By the same token, I think that the progressive movement should seek not only to aid and strengthen our traditional allies, such as the labor movement, but that we should also look for allies across a broader swath of U.S. society. For example, we could make a greater effort to work with those elements of the capitalist class who are far-sighted enough to see that many of the economic policies now being pursued in the United States, ostensibly in their class interest, are in fact counter to almost everyone's long-run interest. Within the domestically-based non-financial business sector there are surely some business-men and -women who see the desirability of public spending on education and infrastructure, of employment-generating and energy-saving programs, of limits on financial speculation, etc. Why not try to divide the potentially progressive business interests from the financiers and the right-wing free-marketeers?

Against this kind of coalition-building strategy, it could be argued that the role of radicals is to fight for reforms so revolutionary that they make social-democratic reforms look by comparison moderate and reasonable. The idea is that mainstream politicians and the general public can be moved to support such reforms on the grounds that they are necessary to stave off more radical left-wing alternatives. But this argument makes sense only if there is sufficient support for revolutionary reforms to make the threat of a radical alternative credible. Without a much stronger radical left than can be found in the United States today, that threat is empty. The challenge in the United States for at least the next few decades is to unite radicals and liberals into a force sufficiently great to achieve more moderate social-democratic goals.

I would argue that a similar point is relevant to the growth of URPE as an organization. Our biggest challenge is to attract more young people to join the ranks. This was not such a challenge in the first decade or so, when the left was considerably stronger in the United States and many high school and college students were attracted by radical alternatives to the *status quo*. But it has become much more difficult since then, especially in the context of the ongoing economic crisis. Under current economic conditions students are bound to be much more concerned with securing paid employment, not to mention paying off student debt, than in the past; so the opportunity cost of political activism in support of radical goals has greatly increased. To maintain and indeed expand its reach, URPE needs to attract more young people of liberal and social-democratic beliefs. To do this we will need to come across as more moderate in our orientation. Rather than focusing on differentiating RPE from mainstream economics and economists, I believe we should stress that what differentiates us most importantly is our political activism in support of progressive goals.

7. The Long-run Need for an Alternative to Capitalism

Given the enormous power of right-wing free-marketeers, and the power of money in politics – especially within the United States – it is easy to despair about the possibility of bringing about a more social-democratic system, let alone a visionary alternative to capitalism as we know it. The traditional standard-bearer of the left – the labor movement – was never that strong in the United States, by international standards, and here, as elsewhere in the world, it has been declining in power and influence. The left has a noteworthy but minority presence in the media, and modest representation in elected offices; but it has little political power except in some urban areas and college towns. The Occupy Movement lacked the resources and the organization to pose a serious challenge to the powers-that-be.

On the plus side, the labor movement is resilient and it has made advances in some areas, especially in the public sector. Moreover, there is evidence of a good deal of progressive activity at the grass-roots level, from resistance to foreclosures to democratically-managed firms and other forms of cooperative economic activity, as highlighted by the spread of solidarity economy

networks.⁷ However, the obstacles to a revival of labor movement strength and to the spread of a solidarity-economics movement remain daunting. Looking into the future, where could one possibly find a powerful source of opposition to contemporary capitalism, dominated as it is by the forces of the right?

Strong political opposition to the *status quo* can only arise in the context of a serious systemic crisis, such as those associated with the internal contradictions that doom once-prosperous SSAs. In the past I have suggested that the most basic sources of future contradictions of capitalism, likely to promote major crises requiring fundamental structural change, are (1) the deterioration of the social environment and consequent growth of civil unrest and conflict, and (2) the deterioration of the natural environment and consequent depletion and destruction of the earth's ecological assets (Weisskopf 1992). It seems clear now that I overemphasized the first possible source, because the many groups marginalized by decades of growing inequality under contemporary capitalism have not been able, and are unlikely in the future to be able, to mount a serious threat to ruling elites in the capitalist world, except perhaps in some relatively peripheral countries. Note too that the political salience of inequality tends to be undermined by economic growth, as some economic gains trickle down to the less well-off; but the political salience of ecological destruction is heightened by economic growth, because environmental deterioration becomes more and more evident, as we are witnessing most clearly in China today.

I believe, therefore, that ecological contradictions will prove far more challenging to the contemporary world capitalist order than social contradictions. Indeed, they will almost certainly be strong enough to doom capitalism in the long run, though most likely not until many more decades have passed. Growing inequality, with its resultant social pathologies, can generate many kinds of difficulties for the health of a capitalist system, but it does not threaten its economic foundation. Growing ecological disruption, however, will ultimately undermine the material foundation of capitalist prosperity.

The contradiction between economic growth, necessary for the stability of a capitalist economy, and the ecological constraints of a finite earth, is thus fundamental. The structural changes required to enable humanity to live within those constraints must ultimately transform the whole capitalist structure – keyed as it is to ever more growth of production and consumption – into a system that prioritizes conservation, redistribution, and quality of life over quantity of goods. Capitalism simply cannot deliver what will become essential for humanity: truly sustainable development.⁸ This will clearly require collective action overseen by strong government institutions at the macro level, as well as large-scale substitution of cooperative approaches for market logic at the micro level. As numerous well-informed analysts have observed, “climate change is the most serious market failure in human history” (Stern 2007; Schor 2011).

The needed long-run transition to a post-capitalist world can occur in either of two ways. It could be evolutionary, in the form of increasingly effective environmental policies spearheaded by the left in coalition with more moderate – but politically more powerful – centrist forces. Or it could be revolutionary, provided that oppositional forces have gained sufficient strength to confront and defeat the powers-that-be. In all likelihood this could only occur in the context of a deep crisis characterized by catastrophic environmental calamities and resource wars. The historical record of the costs and outcomes of revolutionary change is sobering. I think it only makes sense to push as hard as possible for the evolutionary alternative.

It is critical that the rich, whose well-being is unimpaired – if not actually enhanced – by the poverty of the poor, or the plight of exploited workers, *will* be affected by ecological destruction.

⁷For information about the activities of various solidarity economy networks, see <http://www.ussen.org/> (for the United States) and <http://www.ripess.org/about-us/?lang=en> (around the world).

⁸Truly sustainable development calls for “changes in human material activities which radically lessen the depletion of nonrenewable and not easily renewable resources and the harmful pollution of the environment, which thus radically lengthen the time over which human material needs can be met” (Sutcliffe 1995).

They too suffer when temperatures become unbearable outside, when air becomes highly polluted, when storms become fiercer, and when rising oceans destroy low-lying land and waterfront property. True, the rich have far more resources than the poor to protect themselves from such environmental dangers, but they cannot altogether escape them. This helps to explain the modest steps that have already been taken in the environmental arena toward limiting dependence on fossil fuels and averting global warming.

In the short run the threat of global warming can be reduced by fairly straightforward measures, such as: a steadily rising carbon tax or equivalent cap-and-trade scheme to make fossil fuel producers pay for their negative environmental externalities, and subsidies for renewable energy development and for home energy-efficiency measures (Harris 2013). The main obstacle to forward movement along these lines is insufficient political power to overcome fossil-fuel-based interests and the huge financial resources of those interests. But the politics of some of the major world economies have already begun to change in a more favorable direction as a result of the growing environmental threats; and, especially in the more social-democratic countries of Europe, real progress is being made.

In the longer run much more drastic change will clearly be required to achieve an ecologically sustainable world economy, including measures to phase out fossil fuels altogether, to limit resource throughput and energy use. Progress in these respects will clearly call for more collective control of the economy, less unfettered individual freedom, large-scale substitution of human activity for material resources in production, as well as movement away from material-based consumption toward more non-material amenities contributing to human well-being (Jackson 2009; Schor 2011). In short, a transformation of capitalism as we know it.

So I believe that we radical economists need to focus increasing attention on the ecological threat to life on this planet. We need to join forces with allies to our right to study and advocate for politically feasible policies that in the short run will reduce global warming and climate disruption. And we need to work on and publicize new models of climate-friendly production and consumption that in the long run will sustain the earth as well as support a higher quality of life for all.

8. Conclusion

As Andrew Delbanco has written (2013: 4), the word *radical* “once implied deep discontent with the basic structure of society and revolutionary zeal to overturn it.” My own view of the direction in which RPE should be heading may well give rise to the question: in what sense can I still claim to speak for *radical* political economists?

I would answer that the word *radical* still conveys several important characteristics that distinguish our work from that of our mainstream peers. We start from a conception of the good society that is radically more democratic, more egalitarian, and more solidaristic than that of the mainstream. We believe that significant progress toward the good society will require radical changes in the structure of contemporary society, which is in fundamental ways inconsistent with human well-being. We see ourselves not as dispassionate observers and analysts of society, but as participants engaged in an effort to improve it. And we wish to work not primarily with those who hold the levers of power, but with those who are struggling at the grass-roots to contest the *status quo*.

I submit that we can be *radical* in all these senses, without committing to belief in the necessity of a revolutionary confrontation with the powers-that-be. My reading of history, and of contemporary political realities, is that an evolutionary strategy is far more likely to succeed in achieving fundamental radical objectives than a revolutionary strategy.

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Thomas E. Weisskopf (PhD Economics, MIT, 1966) has taught at the Indian Statistical Institute, at Harvard University, and since 1972 at the University of Michigan (UM), where he is now Professor Emeritus of Economics. From 1996 to 2001 and from 2002 to 2005 he served as director of the UM's Residential College. Weisskopf is a co-founder and long-time member of URPE, and he has participated frequently in activities promoting economic understanding and social change on the UM campus, in the Ann Arbor community, and in the wider world. His publications (mostly co-authored) include ten books and more than 100 articles in a wide range of journals in the fields of economic development, macroeconomics, comparative economic systems, political economy, economic sociology, and public policy.