

FROM THE LEFT

THE MARXIST SECTION NEWSLETTER of ASA

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T.R. Young, Senior Editor



****Cartoon fromCrumb**

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BUILDING SOCIALIST NETWORKS

by Eric Sommers

A. In this issue of FTL, I would like to outline a proposal to build info-structures' for a new kind of network-based socialism. The ultimate goal of such projects is to enable all underclass people, all progressive people, and all progressive organizations, wherever they may be on the planet, to interconnect with each other: 1) through new network-based electronic tools and means; and 2) through new `network-enabled' co-operative forms of social life, political action, organization, and economy, which these tools can support, so that 3) the people of the world may become increasingly able to work together to care for one another together with the planet. In short, the purpose of our project is to build the informational infrastructure for a new kind of `networked socialism'.

B. General Introduction To Network Technologies. Human social life has always operated through networks. Since early human pre-history, there have been social networks based on physical proximity, information-sharing through language, and prescriptive social rules and other mutual expectation sets used to structure human interactions. These initial `network elements' have been joined by production, trade, and transportation networks, and later by monetary and financial networks, which have connected people in more complex ways, including of course the division of social labour, and at greater physical distances.

Such networks have supported - just as the internet does today - the diffusion and sharing of culture, information, ideas, and material products. It could even be argued that there has always been a `world net' connecting all of humanity. But until relatively recently the

propagation of innovations, information, or material products through this 'world net' could be glacially slow. Due to limitations in both information and transportation technologies, a new cultural or technological innovation might take hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of years to diffuse from one part of the globe to another.

Network technologies, technologies for the processing, storage, sharing, and transmission of informational or material items are key enablers of human organizational capabilities. Radical transformations in one always accompany radical transformations in the other. Spoken language, for example, is necessary for the emergence of human bands and tribes. The creation and sharing of non-instinctive gender and kinship roles; information-sharing in co-operation subsistence activities such as hunting and gathering; and the story-telling which built a band or tribes sense of community and a shared world, all depended on the power of speech.

With the emergence of the first civilizations 7,000 years ago, written language was added as an essential enabler for the more complex religious, governmental, and economic systems typified by the temple, palace, and granary found in the central citadels of the first cities. Regulation and taxing of the irrigation systems which supported the food production needs of these cities could, in particular, be performed only with the help of writing.

Today a fundamental re-ordering of humanity's underlying network technology is also taking place. The rise of the 'networked world' is progressively interconnecting human beings, computers, machines, robots, information, and sensing devices for both human and environmental processes in a global matrix which will leave nothing untouched. Moreover, all previous network technologies--from spoken and written language, to money, to computer-readable barcodes and accounting, to the telephone, to television, to computer hardware and software--are 'collapsing into', and being reintegrated and recombined within, the internet and its allied technologies.

All of previous historical 'networking' was, in a sense, implicit. Only with the rise of modern means of transportation and communication--and especially telecommunications and computer networks--is the networked character of social life 'discovered', 'pulled-out', made explicit, and gradually developed as a conscious material means of building a new foundation or infrastructure for human existence.

C. Prospect For A Socialist Network. Like the introduction of writing in the archaic world, the current transformation in humanity's 'network technology' opens the prospect of fundamentally new characteristics and capabilities in human organizations. At present, most of the best of this technology has been assimilated to the financial and military needs of transnational capital and its minions in various nation-states. There are better uses for this and all other technologies; uses oriented to collective need and human emancipation.

Early harbingers of these new organizational capabilities can be found in the emerging lexicon of the networked organization: 'distributed organizations'; 'social technologies'; 'computer-supported co-operative work'; 'computer-supported co-operative learning'; 'network-based workgroups'; 'just-in-time learning'; 'virtual currencies'; 'socio-technical architecture'; 'integrated design, production, marketing, distribution, and use of products',

`virtual multi-user realities'; and so forth.

D. Services To Be Delivered Over A Socialist Network.

The services to be delivered over a socialist network cannot be fixed in advance for all time. The socialist network, and the `socialist desktop' of services and tools, should rather be designed to evolve over time in keeping with: 1) the general development of society; 2) the development of progressive movements for social improvement and transformation; 3) the appearance of technical innovations in the information technology field; 4) innovations and experiments by participants in the socialist network itself; and 5) the cumulative development and learning experience of the network. However, a general sketch can be provided which covers the character of the network, with some examples of the kinds of services which might be included:

E. Democratic Social Economy.

One key set of services will be those which provide for network-supported democratic structures of `socialist economy', which might also be called `network-based economic democracy'.

A socialist network can provide essential support for `collaboration, communication, and co-ordination' between people working together in co-operative, democratically-controlled processes for the production, distribution, and use of the products of human endeavor on local, regional, national, and global levels. The network can, moreover, be used to help insure that these processes are efficient, ecologically sound, and humane. `Shared electronic workspace', `workflow management', and other work-group support software can be used to facilitate the kind of collaboration indicated.

Such organizations include workers co-ops, consumers co-ops, non-profit financial institutions such as credit unions, and other organizations which participate in a `social economy'. Once fully under way, however, the structures and processes of these organizations, and of network-based economic democracy, will pass through a series of `sea-changes' as the new `process capabilities' of the underlying network technology make themselves felt.

Outreach services. Another set of services which could be integrated into a socialist network, and which support the thrust towards economic democracy, are those involving `interactive outreach' by: 1) trade-unions seeking to `organize the unorganized' and to better work with and interconnect both their present members and organizations; 2) poor people's organizations seeking to reach, interconnect, and organize poor people for both self-help and political action on local, regional, national, and global scales ; 3) organizations of people of colour and aboriginal organizations struggling against discrimination and oppression; 4) women's organizations working to organize women to combat patriarchal structures and attitudes; 5) ecological organizations, working for the environment; and 6) organizations seeking to build intentional communities for co-operative living, work, and earthcare. Again, however, all such organizations and activities would inevitably pass through a sea-change once supported by the power of a socialist network.

F. Building the Socialist Network.

A first step in building the socialist network might be for a small `startup' group to agree on a tentative definition of the project, and to produce a preliminary mission statement.

This group could then begin to establish a `pre-network' among themselves. This network would be used to begin connecting the organizations, people, and information needed for the project. The pre-network would also be used to begin building preliminary consensus on directions for the project. The pre-network could begin with a simple on-line interactive `mailing list' for communication. Over time, as the project and the number of participants grow, other enabling technologies for the pre-network could be added including but not necessarily limited to: shared electronic workspace technology; electronic document management and sharing; and real-time audio/computer conferencing by participating organizations and individuals for simultaneous joint collaborative work on the creation of documents and directions for the network.

Another key first step in actually building the network would be to begin building an alliance for that purpose: such an alliance could include, but need not be limited to, individuals and organizations from:

- a)** Progressive social change sectors (progressive academics, poor people's organizations, feminist organizations, economic co-operatives and `social economy' organizations, ecology organizations, trade unions, progressive third world organizations, socialist and left libertarian organizations and movements.
- b)** progressive people and organizations in the alternate health and human potential movements.
- c)** progressive information technology organizations and individuals - including progressive management people from both the business and non-profit sectors who have practical experience in integrating information technology with human work process systems for discovering, creating, and delivering `values' in the form of goods or services. The early formation of the `pre-network' would provide essential support in contacting and integrating the various people and organizations as they come on board. Handled properly, the proposed on-line alliance would generate an explosion of progressive creativity particularly through the synergies between people with information technology and business management expertise and left and co-operativist organizations.

Once the pre-network has laid an adequate foundation, a North American (U.S., Canada, and Mexico) founding conference might be held for purposes of further developing and consolidating the project. This conference could include: 1) viewing, and putting to practical use wherever possible during the conference, examples of technologies which might be used in the socialist network; 2) working towards agreement on the socio-technical architecture, and the `standards' both social and technical, to be used in building the network. (Where such agreement is not immediately possible, committees will be formed for

carrying on this work); 3) a key part of the network architecture to be agreed on is the democratic management structure (network enabled, naturally!) which will be used to operate the network and make decisions about it; and 4) last but not least, the conference would strive to agree on the first applications or classes of applications to be developed over the network. This conference would have both a face-to-face aspect (for those able to attend in person), and an on-line aspect (for those unable to attend in person).

Following the conference, the initial socio-technical architecture of the network, and the initial applications running on it, would be built and/or put in place. This phase would include, but need not be limited to, the prototyping, development, user-testing, and deployment of the first applications and services to on-line users.

After that, the socialist network would exist as a new factor in world economy and politics, and the rest would, as they say, 'be history'.

G. Some Other Possibilities For A Socialist Network.

In concluding this article, I would like to further awaken imaginations by exploring some other possibilities for a socialist network. To begin with, I want to point out that we are on the edge of what I have called 'hypercash: the coming revolution in community based electronic currency.' Should socialists attempt to issue their own electronic currency - 'social currency' - and establish their own on-line bank electronic bank for dealing in and regulating this non-traditional form of cash? Lest this sound implausible, the former head of city bank, one of the largest of u.s. Financial institutions, is on record as suggesting that we are entering the era of 'multiple-monies'; and even 7-11, the convenience store people, are in the process of creating what amounts to their own '7-11 money'.

Establishing socialist on-line money might be far less expensive, and technically simple, than one might imagine. It would not have to use existing automated teller networks, although there is no reason not to investigate the feasibility of doing so. The socialist bank could, rather, be located on an ordinary server computer, in conjunction with 'secured transaction' software to insure the privacy and security of transactions. It would then be a matter of creating appropriate currency with appropriate 'backing'. People with access to ordinary pc's and a modem could then dial in to the socialist bank website to transfer their social money from one party to another.

Finally, a word about the relationship of a socialist network to the third world. Poor telecommunications infrastructure, rapacious service providers, and generalized poverty have made internet and web access prohibitively expensive for a large part of the third world. However, some of these barriers are about to fall, as the new LEOS (low earth orbiting satellite) and other sky-based technologies open the door to circumvent local providers and infrastructure bottlenecks and build community based internet systems which connect directly to the world telecommunications system by satellite. Some native communities in remote areas of Canada are already using such a satellite link to provide connectivity for members, and as costs fall this option will become available to ever-more third world and aboriginal people. Even in desperately poor areas such as Chiapas, Mexico or rural Guatemala there is a need and desire - as reflected in recent discussions I have had with

organizers working in those areas - for this kind of connectivity. A key question for a socialist network would be how best to connect with, and work with, third world and aboriginal people's as we extend the socialist network's reach.

[<Eric Sommer>](#)

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Subscribe to Critical Sociology and preserve the rich progressive legacy in sociology from the 1960's.

**The [ASA MARXIST SECTION](#) now has a HOME- PAGE, thanks to Martha Gimenez and Glenn Muschert.

**The Red Feather Institute has a home page: The new URL is: <http://www.tryoung.com>
The Red Feather Home Page includes:

- A. the [Sociology Series](#);
- B. The 3rd Edition of the [Red Feather Dictionary](#);
- C. Articles on [Non-linear Social Dynamics](#);
- D. [Socgrad Network Lectures](#);
- E. Recent Issues of [FROM THE LEFT](#);
- F. [Teaching Sociology Materials](#).
- G. [LEFT-LINKS](#); direct connections to some of the electronic resources for building a socialist info- structure.

**SUBSCRIBE to CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY. Keep the flame alive. Val Burris reports that your libraries are failing to renew. Take direct action on this one.

**MIDWEST SCHOLARS CONFERENCE. Oct. 24-25, 1997. Strategies for Workplace, School and Community in the 21st Century. at Roosevelt University. Contact: AnitaNFD@aol.com.

**RADICAL PHILOSOPHY ASSOCIATION continues to offer praxical expressions of ethics, epistemology, logic and metaphysics to its members and readers.

To subscribe to RPA, send mail to:

majordomo@indiana.edu type this in the message body: Subscribe [your email address]

**CENTER FOR DEMOCRATIC VALUES. Ron ARONSON is developing a Left think-tank with Democratic Socialists of America. Contact: RARONSO@CMS.CC.Wayne.edu

**ASA MEETINGS IN TORONTO: The Marxist Section Meets on Wednesday, Aug 13, 97.

FORMAL SESSIONS are:

****STATE TERRORISM:** contact STEPHANIE SHANKS- MEILE:
sshanks@iunhaw1.iun.indiana.edu

****THE NEW WORLD ORDER: Globalization/Imperialism:** contact: MARTHA GIMENEZ:
gimenez_m@gold.colorado.edu

****CLASS STRUGGLE AND IDENTITY POLITICS:** contact LAUREN LANGMAN
YLPSLLO@cpua.it.luc.edu or Steve Rosenberg mdr@borg.evms.edu

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REFERRED ROUND-TABLES

****BERCH BERBEROGLU:** Class Analysis of 3rd World Societies. Contact:
berchb@scs.unr.edu Fax: (702) 784 1358

****MIKE-FRANK EPITROPUOULOS:** Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of the State.
Contact: Karp@vms.cis.pitt.edu

****MICHAEL GRIMES, LSU, and JOAN MORRIS, U/CENTRAL FLORIDA:** Life in Academia for Working Class Sociologists.

****DEREK PRICE, American U.:** The Global Military Complex of the New World Order. Email:
DP4257A@American.edu

****RICARDO DUQUESNE, U/New Brunswick:** Marxist Historical Sociology and the Weberian Challenge Contact:rduchesn@admin1.unbj.ca

INFORMAL DISCUSSION ROUND-TABLES

****MORT WENGER:** Militias, Zapatistas, Crips and Bloods: Pre-Theoretical Rebellion and Resistance. Contact: MGWeng01@ULKYVM.Louisville.edu

****JOANNE NAIMAN and JOHN SAKERIS:** Canada and the New World Order. Both are at Ryerson Polytech, 350 Victoria St., Toronto, M5B 2K3, Ontario, CANADA. Email:
jnaiman@acs.ryerson.ca

****HELEN RAISZ:** Life and Death in the Global Economy. hraisz@mercy.sjc.edu

****LLOYD KLEIN:** The Devil and Ms. Jones: Identity Politics and the "Jenny Jones Murder

Trial." Iklein@uhavax.hartford.edu

**JACKIE CARRIGAN: Marxian Theory and Health Issues. U/Colorado at Boulder, Co., 80309-0329 carrigan@raastro.colorado.edu

**BILL WHIT: Marxist and non-Marxist Approaches to Food, Eating and Agriculture. Contact: whitw@GVSU.EDU

**SOLOMON GASHAW: Class, Ethnicity and the State in Ethiopia: egashaws@caa.mrs.umn.edu

**VALERIE SCATAMBURLO: Sociology, York University. Capitalism and Identity. valeries@yorku.ca

**LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD. A new Award. Send nominations to T.R. Young, TR.Young@UVM.EDU.

**MARXIST SCHOLARSHIP AWARD: Chair, Larry Miller.

**AL SYZMANSKI AWARD: Chair, Abigail Fuller

**CREATING A JUST WORLD: leadership for the 21st Century. 47th Annual Meeting of SSSP at Toronto, Aug 8-10 at the Metropolitan Hotel.

**SUBSCRIBE to Contemporary Justice Review for a journal oriented to restorative justice. Contact: gezellig@global2000.net

H-NET. Subscribe to H-Net and get connected to one of the largest humanist networks on-line. 57 newsletters reach 45,000 subscribers. Post to: Listserv@msu.edu Send: Subscribe H-TEACH YourFirstName YourLastName, College

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GRADUATE STUDENT NEWS

**Two new mini-lectures are on-line for members of socgrad network: they both deal with postmodern concepts of structure grounded on chaos/complexity theory. As such, the lectures speak against the post- structural critique of class, race and gender as discernible social structures.

**Check out the Minority Scholarship Fund of the Society for the Study of Social Problems,

Chair: Walda- Katz Fishman, Howard University.

****Check out special sessions at ASA/Toronto for grad students:**

1. Special Session 2. Teaching Humanist Sociology: Steve McGuire. Saturday: Aug 9, 8:30am.
2. Graduate Education Forum...nearly every session slot...check the program.
3. Marketing Skills for the Non-Profit Job Market: Session 86, Sat. Aug 9, 4:30pm.
4. Getting Journal Articles Published: Session 264, Monday, 11 Aug., 2:30pm.

****Negotiating the Job Market: Session 286, Monday, Aug. 11, 4:30pm.**

****A whole Series of Workshops on teaching various subjects; theory, strat, family, etc on Monday, 9 Aug...check Program.**

****Preparing Grad Students to Teach, Judith Howard, et al, Session 476, Tues, Aug 12.**

****Part-time, Temp jobs in Sociology, Session 330, Phyllis Raabe, Carla Howery, Tues, 12 Aug, at 10:30am.**

****Research Funding Opportunities, Session 168, Felice Levine, Carol Davis, Sun. Aug 10, at 1-4:00pm.**

****Grad Student Research, Session 242, Mon, Aug 11 at 12:30pm.**

****Graduate Programs in Sociology, Kate Linnenberg, Session 266, Mon. Aug 11 at 2:30**

****Reflecting on Graduate Admissions Process, Joseph Lengermann, Session 308, Tues, 12 Aug, 8:30am. Get out of bed for this one.**

****Hospitality Room: all students are invited to use this hospitality room. 8am to 8pm.**

****Student Discounts: Register before 15 June to take advantage. See form on any 1997 Program.**

****Student Reception: Mon, Aug 11 at 6:30pm...You are invited.**

****Summary of Grad Student Sessions: 47, 70, 86, 195, 217, 237, 242, 266, 277, 286, 288, 355 in the Program.**

****Student Housing: Send a letter with your student i.d. to ASA Student Housing asap.**



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