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The difficulty with alternatives

B. Martin

University of Wollongong, [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au)

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# The difficulty with alternatives

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**Brian Martin**

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email: [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au)

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Criticising the existing system seems pretty easy. Lots of people do it. Why is it so difficult, in comparison, to promote alternatives? Whether the topic is the military, the nuclear family, the market or the prison system, there is little attention to alternatives compared to criticism of the current system.

For example, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1979) in their classic book *The Political Economy of Human Rights* document US government sponsorship of repressive regimes. But they don't discuss how to promote change in these policies.

In his book *The Credential Society*, Randall Collins (1979) offers a devastating critique of the role of education systems in maintaining social inequality. Although he outlines several political positions regarding the market in educational qualifications, he gives no serious attention to how to create alternatives.

Benjamin Ginsberg (1984) in his penetrating book *The Consequences of Consent* argues that the system of elections increases the power of the state and reduces the prospects for greater democratisation. However, he doesn't discuss alternatives to electoral politics or how to achieve them.

I am tremendously impressed by each of these books. They offer eye-opening critiques. But, like many other such works, they say little about taking action. Alternatives often aren't mentioned at all.

I think authors such as these do a tremendous service through their critiques. Many readers are outraged and energised and become more active. The problem is not too much critique, but rather that there isn't nearly enough discussion of alternatives to go along with the critique. Without alternatives, there is a risk that critique becomes a form of loyal opposition. Here I discuss several explanations for why promoting alternatives is so difficult.

## The real and the possible

Although there are divergent interpretations of reality and disagreements about diagnoses, nearly everyone agrees about many things, such as that, in Australia, most people drive cars, elections are

held and rape occurs. These areas of agreement constitute a shared reality.

In contrast to the level of agreement about current reality, there are many conceivable and possible future realities, especially if we think decades down the track. Even when we restrict thinking to *better* futures, there are still plenty of possibilities. There might be better funded public education systems or perhaps more home schooling or instead deschooling with learning as part of community activity. There could be work for everyone or instead leisure for everyone. There could be international peace protected through international organisations or instead expansion of the capacity for waging conflict nonviolently.

Because there are so many possible alternatives, when it comes to specifics it's easier for many people to agree on what they're against than about what they're for.

That helps explain why rallies are relatively easy to organise against specific problems, such as the latest war or racist policy. Antiglobalisation rallies bring together protesters from a range of perspectives, united mainly by their opposition to globalisation, not any specific positive view.

Another factor is that, because we live in the existing world (rather than an alternative one), it is easier to understand the current system and how it operates than to understand a hypothetical alternative. Just through living in the world, people share many understandings of what exists. Despite differences in perception and interpretation, these commonalities are substantial and provide a basis for protesters to agree on what they are against. But because alternatives, whether they are free schools, cohousing, consensus decision making or towns without cars, are experienced by relatively few people, there is less basis for common understanding.

## **A just world?**

According to psychologists, most people assume implicitly that the world is just (Lerner, 1980). The assumption is that because something exists or happens, it ought to be that way. Rich people and countries are thought to deserve their wealth, celebrities to deserve their fame and successful people to deserve their attainments. This is reinforced by Hollywood movies in which good inevitably triumphs over evil. The upshot is a tendency to blame victims for their plight, whether this is poor people or convicted criminals (Ryan, 1971).

Social activists do not fall into this psychological trap so easily, of course, as they are out there campaigning on behalf of victims. But because the 'just world hypothesis' is so widely held, there's a lot of work to be done in convincing others that social problems are not due to the victims. This again puts a premium on critique, namely exposing what's wrong with the system, rather than proposing and pursuing social alternatives.

## **Media and conflict**

What we see and read in the news is shaped by 'news values', the criteria that journalists and editors instinctively use to decide what is newsworthy (Bennett, 1988; Tiffen, 1989). One of the key news values is conflict, whether it is war or politicians disagreeing. This attention to conflict is not just a flaw in the media, but reflects a wider human tendency to notice conflict and ignore cooperation, even though cooperation underlies most of what we do every day.

Attention to conflict has a certain survival value, since it is wise to be aware of risks and opportunities. But by the same token, attention to conflict deflects attention from alternatives. How

so? In most conflicts, the orientation of each contending party is to achieving its goals. The attention of outsiders is directed to the perceptions and demands of those involved. Creative solutions are thin on the ground. Entrenched conflicts leave even less scope for alternatives.

When there is a shared belief in the possibility of cooperation, as in consensus decision making, conflict can be more productive. But this gets little attention in the media.

When there is a conflict, it is tempting to take sides, as in sporting competitions, which are media staples. It requires more psychological energy to reject the terms of the conflict altogether and think in terms of alternatives.

To communicate quickly and easily, the mass media routinely rely on common cultural understandings of the way the world works. For example, to say that 'Washington today announced a war on terrorism' assumes that 'Washington' stands for US government policy makers, that 'terrorism' refers to terror by nonstate groups and 'rogue states' (with most government-sponsored terrorism excluded by definition) and that 'war' is an appropriate stance in relation to terrorism. In other words, the mass media draw on and reinforce the standard frameworks of meaning that most people use to understand the world. To express a contrary view about terrorism is difficult enough in the face of standard understandings and media shorthands, and expressing an alternative strategy would require far too much explanation. In a sound-bite society (Scheuer, 1999), current realities and standard viewpoints have a great advantage in the media.

## **The tyranny of malice**

The human emotions of envy, greed and jealousy are incredibly powerful but their effects are seldom fully recognised. As defined by Joseph H Berke (1988), envy is the desire to destroy another person because their perceived achievements or other qualities are psychologically threatening, causing a sense of inferiority. Greed is a desire for what others have. Jealousy is a rivalry for love, an envy of relationships between other people. These emotions are widespread.

Malice can take many forms and be directed against various targets, including family, friends, neighbours and people who are disadvantaged. Some social activists have only the most noble motives, but others are driven, in part, by envy and greed, especially of those with power and wealth. This helps explain the special passion with which politicians and corporate executives are denounced, as if they are personally responsible for the world's problems rather than being symptoms of an inequitable system.

Let me be clear. There can be very good reasons for opposing systems of unequal power and wealth. At the same time, some activists may be motivated partly by envy and greed. This envy and greed do not mean that activism is unwarranted. But it is important to be aware of motivations.

The current system offers ready targets for expressing malice: social problems can be attacked, with special vehemence reserved for individuals associated with them. In contrast, social alternatives offer no such convenient vent for hostile emotions. Hence, those driven by envy and greed are more likely to attack the current system with venom than to develop and support alternatives.

Furthermore, joining or even just acknowledging someone else's alternative can be threatening to some people's self-esteem. If it isn't their pet idea, then it must be no good. This may explain why people proposing alternatives are sometimes criticised more severely by radicals than by defenders of the current system.

## Alternatives are threatening

Many social alternatives are threatening to elites, namely those who are privileged in the current system of power, wealth and status. That's obvious enough. But some alternatives are also threatening to 'alternative elites', namely those who hope to gain by replacing the present elites.

For example, in party politics the alternative to the party in power is the party in opposition. Party supporters, especially elites, can be vicious in their attacks on opponents, but they all support the party system. Alternatives within the present system are tolerated. System-challenging alternatives, on the other hand, are ignored or attacked. Political alternatives that get rid of the party system are simply not on the agenda.

The threat of alternatives to alternative elites helps explain why there is so much attention to people and policies and so little to social structures. Getting different people into powerful positions and introducing new policies is an avenue for alternative elites. Changing the system to eliminate powerful positions is not.

## What to do?

Promoting alternatives is seldom easy. Still, there are many things worth doing. Individuals and groups can examine their information consumption patterns and develop plans to spend a certain proportion of time focussing on alternatives.

Edward de Bono has developed a range of tools for thinking, some of which can be used to foster thinking about social alternatives. De Bono (1995) says that the traditional western mode of thinking is critique, which is fine for some purposes but bad for creative purposes. Instead of always wearing the black 'thinking hat' for critical judgement, an individual or group can set aside time for wearing other thinking hats, such as the green hat for new ideas and additional alternatives (De Bono, 1992).

The emotional obstacles to alternatives are more challenging than the cognitive ones. Malice can be deep-seated. Berke (1988), who has documented the role of malice through history, gives little attention to solutions. One response is to just get on with the task of building alternatives, being aware that success will trigger envy and greed in some.

There are a number of ways to open up dialogue about alternatives. The 'heart politics' movement aims for a politics of engagement rather than confrontation (Peavey, 1986). Developing skills for nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 1999) and, more generally, social action (Shields, 1991) is a good foundation for addressing alternatives. Indeed, there are lots of ways to go about examining and promoting alternatives, and quite a few people are involved in doing it. But many more are needed.

In the long run, one goal might be development of a culture of social experimentation, in which trials and evaluation of social alternatives would be routine. Before the scientific revolution, ideas about nature were treated as dogma. With the rise of modern science came the idea of experimentation, which has proved to be an incredibly powerful tool for testing ideas. Although the stated ideals of science such as scepticism and openness to new ideas are often violated in practice, nevertheless there is far more scientific experimentation than there is social experimentation.

We might imagine in the future the systematic testing and comparison of qualitatively different education systems, qualitatively different justice systems and many other social experiments. Social scientists so far have mostly observed society and have had little opportunity for large-scale experimentation. When even a relatively minor social experiment, a heroin trial, is treated as a threat

to the system, the prospect of more serious and challenging experiments &ndash; with workers' self-management or local currencies, for example &ndash; seems remote. It could be said that the age of experimentation with social alternatives is yet to begin. To move things along, there are many possibilities within social action groups, ranging from experiments in styles of communication to ways of sharing tasks and organising decision making.

Even though long-time activists sometimes feel like the social wheel is constantly being reinvented, people in action groups actually have learned a lot about social dynamics. But there is a long way to go before social experimentation becomes widely accepted. Some partisans of particular alternatives may be just as reluctant as defenders of the status quo. After all, experimentation means careful testing. The results may not be what you want.

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Brian Martin is in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Wollongong, [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au); <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/>. He has long had an interest in social alternatives including self-management, social defence and demarchy.