Melbourne

The Social & Ecological Choices

by Ruth & Maurie Crow

Marx said that man changes himself in the process of changing his circumstances. How does this concept apply in the light of the need for a communist society of which we now must expect something more than in Marx's day? Then, a communist society meant the abolition of the alienation of humans from the product of their labor, and an end to the alienation of humans from each other due to their enforced competition on the capitalist market to sell their labor-power. But a communist society, now, has not only to overcome alienation, but to do so without creating ecological instability.

Humankind has the unique capacity to proceed by way of analysing a situation, projecting into the future a perspective or plan, and then steadily to "work" to transform the present into that plan. This remarkable capacity is so elementary that we seldom mention it.

The creative aspect of this process of exercising the capacity to work towards a planned future is precisely what the slaves, the serfs and the wage and salary workers have been robbed of: it is this which strips their humanity from them. The real inequality between humans, doubly compounded in the case of the female of the species under class society, is not merely inequality of distribution of material goods - that's bad enough - but more importantly there has been the inequality of opportunity to exercise that elementary capacity - in all too many of us an atrophied capacity - to work creatively and cooperatively.

"Working" towards a projected future that commences as an idea in the head, humans, walking on two feet have used first weapons in their liberated hands, then tools, and with the liberation of their brains that this enabled, progressively more complicated machines and now technology to reshape both nature and society itself in the process.

Marx showed clearly that the "capital" enshrined in these machines or technology is not simply material "things" but is part of, and cannot be separated from, the social organisation of labor. As one would expect in this system, this proves to be an organisation of the division of labor which best assists the capitalist to control the worker as well as the product, as Mr. Chris Ryan has recently illustrated.

Indeed, each and every time profits are reinvested in further capital growth (which is the whole motive force of the capitalist system), the situation automatically reproduces the social position both of those

Ruth and Maurie Crow are widely known for their work on town planning and have published a book on the subject.
who own the capital, and those who are exploited by it.

But, pertinent to our present problems: the same process also typically reproduces, even on an extended scale, damage to ecosystems. Mr. Ryan argues that since the solution of the ecological challenge lies in the direction of low-energy technology, the very social character of the productive process itself must change. It must change to one amenable to self-management and community control as distinct from globally organised, multinational, bureaucratically controlled production.

To “work at” changing technology is tantamount to saying we have to work at changing lifestyle values, because changing the character of the productive process to one of an impact low enough to sustain ecological stability and one amenable to workers’ control means changing what we consider important in life. To say this, however, is not to ignore that for the masses of people, their values are and will be determined for them by the present system: so the system itself has to be changed. But it does mean that the advanced minority of radicals who reject the capitalist consumerist values should be allies in the task of changing society: that is: communists should look to lifestylers as potential allies, and lifestylers should look to communists as potential allies.

Projection of an alternative system as a goal is unavoidable. Maybe the goal will change as you battle towards it: but without goals there is no battle, only unending class scrimmage within the system. Now, it is typical that any movement has to have starting points that cannot embrace the whole future goal, but begins with small or partial and certainly incomplete objectives. But radicals are out to change the whole system, so for us starting points are not enough. Simultaneously, we have to “work at” the projection of tomorrow’s circumstances for a whole alternative society. For Australia especially, with 85 per cent city dwellers, that includes a whole urban alternative society. Struggling for that bright urban future projected vividly as a feasible human and ecological future that capitalism can’t offer, is the only way to attract the majority of people to the side of a radical alternative social system. We in the advanced capitalist countries cannot expect to get a social revolution first, and only then start to become human, self-managing and ecological.

Moreover, unless the indispensible small and partial efforts of self-management which can have achievable results within the present capitalist framework are given direction, perspective and inspiration by more comprehensive projected goals for the whole of society, the small efforts, even small successes, tend to fizzle out, succumb to obstacles, or even become commercialised and safely incorporated in the established order, serving thus to stave off radicalisation.

Four conditions are therefore suggested:

We need to project a feasible communist Melbourne - not a socialist Melbourne.

Communists for some decades have tended - in my view incorrectly - to project socialism as the big bright be-all and end-all. Yet socialism in marxist terms is a transitional stage between two different social systems: it is only the first necessarily imperfect stage of communism. It’s as if we were trying to enthuse people with some new constructions in course of erection someplace, and we showed them old buildings half pulled down and shapeless new buildings in various stages of erection with scaffolding all around them, saying: “Behold! this is what we offer you!” And at that the images have been from other countries that wouldn’t fit Australian conditions anyway.

So long have we neglected to project the human non-alienating self-managing communist values which we have only in recent years been resurrecting, that communists, in fact, are not typically identified with such values in the minds of workers at large at all. Instead, communists tend to be seen either as good militants who can be trusted to stir things up; or as people interested only in a struggle for power - as if their only objective was to oust the capitalists, stand in their shoes, and subjugate them to authoritarian dictatorship for the sole purpose of redistributing the wealth, simply interchanging the role of the classes. But either image is a caricature of communism - not communism. Either image is distorted because it confuses a phase or aspect of the struggle with the goal being struggled for.

We have to say this to avoid the rejection without consideration of the model which we
will soon project on the grounds of Utopianism, futureology, voluntarism or some other deadly idealistic sin. Long habit inclines some to dismiss anything that seems to look too far ahead on the grounds that it ignores the harsh reality of the multinationals and their compliant state machinery that between them have no other choice but to drive forward the whole capitalist growth ethos, foisting consumerism on us and making environmental destruction inevitable.

Yet, I suggest, the quickest way to assist masses of people (as distinct from radical minorities) to understand what impossible obstacles the big corporations really are, is to project a positive constructive Melbourne as it-ought-to-be, a Melbourne that people can identify with, and which can be seen as a way to overcome their problems. People surely cannot be enthused by a communism based on freeways and overtime.

To fight for a change in power without a change in values simply plays into the hands of trendplanners who extrapolate the future from the present and present it in the sacred name of "reality", often camouflaged with great academic and scientific erudition, as the fate before which we are all expected to submit obediently.

We need an understandable working model of our future goals - not general phrases of better values.

Despite what I said about communists losing sight of their goals, it is true that, in the '70s anyway, those in the CPA at least have been progressively advancing the goals of self-management, workers' control, community control and, more recently still, ecological goals. Such new perspectives have begun to inspire the beginnings of industrial and political struggles in these directions; workers who say: why can't we run the factory instead of taking the sack, or who refuse to build what is bad for the community.

All of this is tremendously welcome; but my proposition is that a further dimension is needed: something between the necessarily generalised presentation of the long-term goals and the necessarily piecemeal character of the partial industrial struggles or experiments in alternative technology.

What is needed is a model of coherent practical principles demonstrating how a communist Melbourne could be superior to a capitalist Melbourne - an operative model which attempts to translate the spirit of the generalised human and ecological goals into a system of urban living shown to be more workable, and with a higher standard of ecological performance than our present one. We need, in a word, some intermediate-stage alternative society that can be visualised by the ordinary citizen, and sufficiently real that some aspects of it can be fought for and realised right now. Armed with such an overall orientation even the loss of a small struggle over an immediate issue need not sap confidence because it can be seen as a small skirmish in a big war.

Such an attempt is not Utopianism: it does not try to evade the industrial infrastructure of multi-nationals as if they don't exist. On the contrary it says: "Look, the capitalist superstructure of political institutions, science, culture, hidden curricula and consumerist and sexist mass media imagery that shape lifestyles and all the rest - no longer meet human needs. A different superstructure is needed capable of shaping the productive forces, that is, the infrastructure, to our needs - and here it is! Here is the sort of alternative superstructure that we have to fight towards, struggling for power to control the infrastructure in the process in just such and such a way.

Until we reach the stage of foreshadowing our own alternative future we will tend to chain ourselves and the whole of the working people to the present system, and keep wondering why the Australian workers don't manage to transcend reformist attitudes.

We need a model of qualitatively different human relationships (both productive and social) as well as redistribution of commodities and services to the deprived.

Egalitarianism is not communism. Productivity in Australia at its present level is quite sufficient to sustain the whole population with adequate food, clothing, shelter, health, education and other basic services.

The Labor government's attempts to go some distance in this direction deserved strong support. But if DURD, AAP, RED, Medibank, child care and the rest really accomplished this, the capitalist system would still be with us, still dominated by the big
polluting industries, still investing their superprofits in the only way they can - into still more industry and more pollution. Of course, under socialism, severe inequality of access to goods and services as now exists would have to be rapidly abolished. And, indeed, it is important for ecologists to support such aims for equitable distribution right now to avoid a wedge being driven between those who need more goods and those who support no-growth-economies.

But this is not enough and it is not communism. A re-slicing of the same cake does not fit a communist Melbourne. In the left wing of the labor movement there are sentiments that have their origin in an awakening class consciousness of the early socialists such as “nothing is too good for the workers” or “what’s good enough for the boss is good enough for the workers”. Translated literally into a socialist model this could mean simply redistributing the physical wealth and existing class of services from the wealthy to the deprived. This could mean doing what the capitalists are doing - though more efficiently. It could mean expansion of production faster in bigger productive units using more energy.

Neither the boss’s personal lifestyle, nor the boss’s “productive style” is something to be worshipped and aped so soon as the workers have the power to do so. Egalitarian distribution of something historically outworn may be equality of a sort, but it is an irrelevant and misdirected effort if our object is an ecologically stabilised society free of alienation.
So - the model of Melbourne we need must provide for access by all, including the deprived who have gained their fair share, to a creative, satisfying life, and that means in the field of production as well as outside it.

We need an all-out effort to implement the needs just mentioned - not spare time attention by a few radical eco-freaks.

To recapitulate, the three needs are:
(a) the goals or value-judgments of a communist Melbourne
(b) a workable understandable model
(c) incorporation of equity to the deprived in the current struggle for superior productive and social relationships.

Such a goal cannot be reached by expending all our political attention to the Russian Chinese, Cuban or Vietnamese people's struggles. Or by confining our perspectives only to immediate pollution or immediate wages/prices struggles. Or by relying solely on global ecological demands such as banning the atom bombs, banning uranium exports and sharing energy with the Third World, important as all these are.

General assumptions used in the construction of the principles for future Melbourne might be:

1. Less energy use

Restructuring the use of energy in industry, transport and domestically to cut down on the scarcer oil and gas, and switch as much as possible to brown coal, as well as reducing overall levels of energy consumed.

2. Responsibility for energy reduction on industry and government.

Consumers are not responsible for the goods and services foisted on them by the capitalist market, any more than the same people, in their capacity as workers - industrial, white collar or professional workers - for the goods made or the production techniques adopted by their bosses. An enlightened minority of alternative lifestylers may succeed in partially by-passing the big corporations, and I say: Good luck to them! Out of all the experimental anti-consumerist producing and living may well come certain ways of existence capable of being popularised and universalised to form part (but only part) of the basis in a technical sense, for an ecologically stable communist society. But it is assumed that, whatever such a minority might evolve, even by way of urban living, the great mass of consumers and nearly all producers cannot do so even if they wanted to. It is therefore assumed that the main direction for energy saving must be by a political effort to change the established order in two main spheres:

(b) functioning of cities - including all the planning, infrastructure services, community services and administration that goes with it.

(The model which follows below is some aspects of (b) only).

3. A higher standard with less effort and less energy.

Defining consumerism as mass production of wasteful and unsatisfying private consumer goods and services based on compulsion and manipulation that arise from the capitalist mode of production, it is assumed that a major effect of restricting energy use could be - with people's control - to actually improve the standard of living. This could be so because, above the level of self sufficiency in food, clothing and shelter at reasonable standards, further improvement of real standards lies in the direction of enriched, unalienated relationships, both on the job and off the job, and not in the direction of continued long hours of alienating work in capital-intensive enterprises making goods or supplying services that further alienate people from each other both as producers and consumers.

4. Collectives on the job and on the concourse

The new, enriched human relationships that will replace alienating conditions with less energy are assumed to lie in the direction of "collectives" - on the job and off. By "collective" is meant a team, for which, since there is a common purpose, there begins to develop a spirit of each contributing as best they can, some with higher skills, others with humble offerings, but all with a quickening appreciation of each other, all teaching and learning from each other, all developing a
more elevated concept of their aims and, with it, incidentally, an increasingly more effective impact on the "tone" or ethos of the factory or community generally.

For historical reasons, Melbourne has a legacy of good radial tram and railway networks serving the inner and middle suburbs, but the newer outer suburban workplaces and shopping towns served by lower-density housing have compelled car access and resulted in a general decline of public transport.

Being a capitalist city from its inception, the whole mode of capitalist production in Melbourne has rested on an unthinking but strong divide-and-conquer principle common to all owning classes towards the working population.

This has resulted in segregation to the point, sometimes, of institutionalisation. So factories are for factory workers, offices for white collar workers, labs for scientists, and none of them are interchangeable or even associated. Kindergartens, schools, housewives at home, and elderly citizens homes stratify into age layers, all of which, of course, are debarked from factory, office or laboratory. And in Melbourne there are plenty of special segregations - Housing Commission ghettos, heavy industries to the west, pubs and football clubs - think up your own example.

So, in place of what might be caned *whole* community, one where male and female, young and old, worker, housewife, student, migrant or not, all feel strongly identified with the community - all feel strongly that they have some part to play, can have their "say", and can do their own community "thing" and are wanted - in place of this, Melbourne gives us segregation and institutionalisation.

Superimposed on this, the postwar car boom has aggravated all these trends to insufferable proportions, because it has added the dimension of dispersal. Result is that factories, shops, pubs, kinders - any facility you can think of - tend to be scattered at random, with a good chance you need a car to get to any of them. "Car access" is the new sacred cow of town-building, but instead of building us urban places for people, the resulting formless sprawl has deprived our outer suburbs of the remotest character of urban life. The result is that children, housewives, sick and elderly are cut off even more effectively than before. Even the "lucky" housewife with the second car is relatively worse off than her pre-war sister. She cannot set off to go to any local centre of activities for it has been scattered or become a regional one where she is a stranger. So the nuclear family, thrown on its own devices, turns in on itself, gets bored with itself, then turns outwards, by car again, to go a hundred miles or so of a week-end to get away from it all.

For the future, the plans of the Melbourne Regional Planning Authority for seven radial corridors and/or satellites for urban growth, with so-called green wedges between, would predetermine Melbourne even more decisively as a car-based metropolis. This is so, because the longer the radial arms grow outward, the further the distances between them become, and the more impossible it would be to service cross-suburban trips from one arm to another with public transport. These trips would also be more and more across open country making them unnecessarily long.

In a sense, the multi-radial arm design is the "sprawliest" design you could think up, and therefore becomes the most car-dependent. Simultaneously, all the socially alienating disadvantages of the outer suburbs will be continued and intensified. That's the official option.

The other option for Melbourne is .....  

1. Urban design to save transport energy and maximise collectives

Deliberately design all new growth areas, and restructure all built-up areas with two objectives in mind:

(a) Take every measure possible to reduce the need for transport, and also to defeat the car and truck as the predominant mode of transport, and in doing so make an immense saving in fossil fuel energy, reducing the road slaughter and minimising pollution at the same time.

(b) To constitute human-scale mixed communities with strong urban centres of sufficient variety and so organised to attract a wide range of local collectives with strong and efficient public transport connections with other such centres and the city to still further increase access to collectives.
2. A design for neighbourhood with concourses for off-street people-parking

A physical design suitable to carry out these objectives for the urbanised centre and the surrounding residential neighbourhood that it serves would ideally have these features:

(a) The urban centre would be located at the geographic centre of the neighbourhood so that the trip from home to centre becomes as short as possible for as many as possible.

(b) Residential density would be lowest on the outskirts of such neighbourhood, with increasing densities as you approached the centre to enable the maximum number of people to walk or cycle to the centre.

(c) Encouragement of cluster-house designs both for low and medium density areas to enable more flexible domestic arrangements, superior outdoor amenity while retaining some outdoor privacy, yet enabling somewhat higher densities, and making public transport and deliveries more efficient.

(d) All people-intensive activities to be located in the centre, that is, shops, offices, labor-intensive light industry, schools, pubs, welfare services, libraries, entertainment, indoor sport with mixed use principles, not only within the centre but even within the same building if compatible.

(e) "People-parking" spaces indoor and compulsory for the use of collectives; and mixed among the commercial/industrial/educational etc. functions. The word "concourse" is used to imply just such an all-inclusive set-up including off-job collectives in people-parking spaces.

(f) Frequent shuttle service local public transport in the form of mini-bus, dial-a-bus, or taxis; and cycle or pedestrian paths all to be funnelled into the concourse to make it more convenient to go to - or through - that concourse than in
any other direction; and commuter and shopping car-parking to be progressively restricted as alternative superior local transport modes take over.

(g) the mixed-use hub of the concourse to be constructed in compact building complexes built over and around selected suburban train stations. In areas of new urban growth this would present no difficulty. In built-up areas of present suburbs there could be a gradual redevelopment around selected stations with a slow transference into the concourse in the new building complexes of whatever people-intensive functions were scattered throughout the neighborhood and at the same time developing other industrial/commercial/educational etc. facilities previously lacking in the local urban area. This could provide a reasonably diversified range of employment, shopping and activities of all kinds to make it easier for more people to work or do-their-own-thing, getting to know others in the process, and without travelling further.

3. Transport between local district and city concourses

(a) Melbourne has a magnificent network of railway reservations - they are like a freeway system equipped with steel rails - and these, plus tram tracks where suitable, should on no account be sacrificed in favor of any gee-whiz technology, but used to form the material framework for connecting concourses with each other and with the city. These long-haul operations, in order to outdo car transport alternatives, should be as fast as possible (in contrast with local public transport to the local concourse, where frequency and closeness to homes is more important). And, as already described, all local transport modes should be created or updated and reorganised to funnel into the local rail station which would then lie at the very heart of all local people-intensive activity, thus creating the optimum conditions that railed transport could possibly have to re-establish its ascendancy over private transport.

(b) Every 4 to 6 local concourses could be served by a somewhat bigger district concourse with a wider range of choices of all sorts than would be possible for the local concourses. Such district concourses would thus be train-based, not car-based, regional centres.

(c) All concourses on the same rail line would be connected strongly by public transport not only with each other but with the city which should have the concourse aspect that is the aspect of All-Melbourne collectives emphasised to the utmost degree, for this is the place with the greatest access by the maximum number of citizens, lying at the centre, as it does, of the whole rail transport network.

4. Removing the multi-directional advantages of car transport

The dominance of the car rests partly on its superlative capacity as a machine to convey people and goods in any direction on our superlative road system. So:

(a) Linear corridor development for all new urban growth is proposed to rob both car and truck of this singular advantage. A rapid transit rail system, twice as fast as cars, would provide real competition. Linear design also has the advantage of being an entirely new and workable form of decentralisation. It's like a whole series of small human-size country towns, humanised still further because of the concourses at their heart, and all strung together; and, thanks to rapid transit, no further from the city in time than any other part of present Melbourne.

(b) Translating the same principle into built-up Melbourne, each radial rail-line could be regarded as lying in the centre of community corridors confined, not in this case by countryside lying on each side of the corridor, but by what could be called "transport watersheds". That is, with all local public transport directed into the local concourse. Local transport would thus be deliberately deployed to provide a material basis to make conditions favorable, or at least possible to create a local community with local collectives. In this case, cross-suburban public transport could be provided, not, as it is now, indiscriminately by bus in many directions, but only by joining district concourses, possibly by express bus routes.