

SYSTEM CHANGE GUIDE

PART I: THE SYSTEM QUESTION

The United States faces a systemic crisis, not simply political and economic difficulties. Our political-economic system was designed by and for the 1%. And the results? Inequality, poverty, unending war, mass incarceration and climate catastrophe.

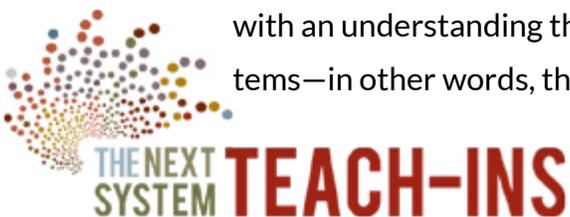
When big problems emerge across the entire spectrum of national life, it is not for small reasons. A political economy is a **system**, and today's system is programmed not to meet basic needs but to prioritize the generation of corporate profits, the accumulation of wealth by a small minority, the growth of GDP, and the projection of national power. If we are serious about addressing the interrelated challenges we face, we need to think through and then build **a new system**, however difficult the task, and however long it may take. *Systemic problems require systemic solutions.*

The good news is that, confronted with mounting social, economic, and ecological crises, growing numbers of people have begun to realize that traditional strategies and reformist approaches no longer work. Simply put, many understand that addressing the problems of the twenty-first century requires going beyond business as usual. It requires “changing the system.” But what does this mean? And what would it entail?

The time has come to think boldly about what is required to deal with the systemic difficulties we are facing. The following curriculum aims to provide some basic readings as a starting point for understanding and discussing the imperative of systemic change and how we might start going about it. It is time to begin a real conversation about genuine alternatives. It is time to develop thoughtful, system-building answers to system-wide challenges. It is time to debate what it will really take to move in a new direction capable of producing sustainable, lasting and more democratic social, economic, and ecological outcomes.

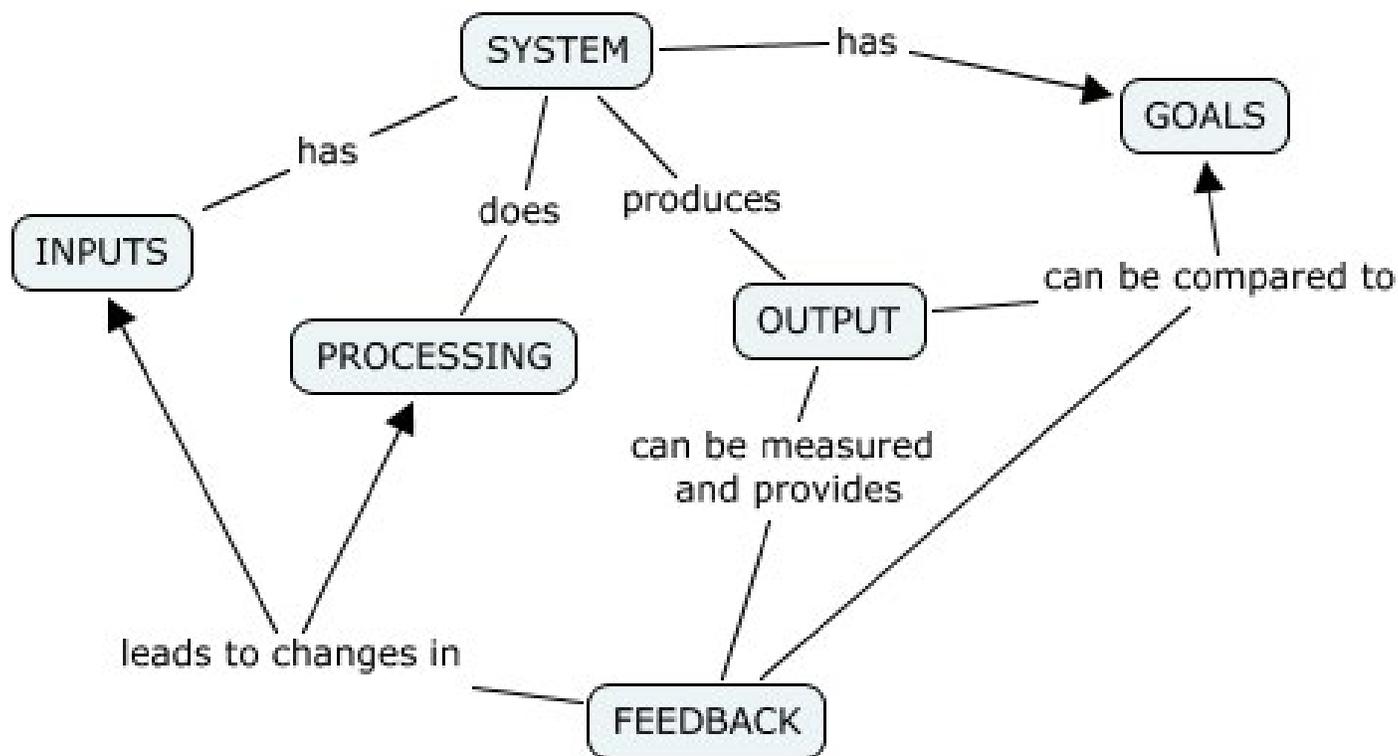
SO, WHEN WE REFER TO “THE SYSTEM” WHAT ARE WE REALLY TALKING ABOUT?

Much of systems theory comes from the fields of physics and engineering. However, systems thinking has become an essential tool for many in fields as varied as anthropology, education, natural sciences, sociology, and law. In this curriculum, we will primarily be referring to **political-economic systems**, but with an understanding they are embedded in social systems and interact with ecosystems—in other words, they don't exist in a vacuum.



A few ways to think about systems in general are to remember that:

- a system is about the **interrelation of parts** (e.g.: people, institutions, processes) in a functioning whole.
- systems have **boundaries** (what are the limits of our system?) and can overlap (e.g. feudalism and capitalism).
- a system can be **nested** inside another system (like our political-economic system nested within a social system and interacting with the ecosystem).



This [interview of Naomi Murakawa](#) is an excellent example of an analysis of one important element

SOURCE: IHMC Cmap Tools

of our current system, the prison industrial complex, as well as how the prison industrial complex is affected by the political-economic system (through policy making and economic goals) and the social system (through bias and prejudice and often violence).

One last note before we take you to the next step. As we move forward, remember that systems are self-perpetuating and their rules and practices self reinforcing. This is one reason that it can often feel daunting to think about how to really change “the system”. But don’t worry! We’ll walk you through several different paths for system change and provide some examples so you can see how they work.

PART 2: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SYSTEM CHANGE

There is a vast literature on the historical precedents we can look to when thinking about changing the system, a literature that is far too extensive to treat in any great depth here. Instead, this section is intended to provide a sense of history and context – and open up the idea of **possibility** – for our discussions on changing the system.

Despite the fact that changing “the system” seems like a very tall order--and it does require a lot of work -- we must remember that, over the long arc of history, radical shifts in political economy do occur. And they happen much more often than you might realize! What follows aims to give a sense of that history, including some of the major shifts the United States has undergone, as well as provide further context for where we might be right now in terms of the potential for radical systemic change.

There are many ways to look at the major shifts in political economy in our history, both in the United States and internationally. So let’s look at how and when great shifts have occurred.

POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS IN U.S. HISTORY

Beginning with the United States, it is possible to identify major shifts which (for better or worse) powered the expansion of what was once a few million people grouped in thirteen colonies along the Eastern seaboard into a continent-spanning political and economic system that operates as the most powerful empire the world has ever seen.

Historians of the United States often point to **at least five major political realignments**. The first **founding period** -- which is in and of itself a reminder of how the most powerful empire of the time, the British Empire, could be challenged and ultimately defeated. This period was followed by a second realignment that led to the **creation of the party system**, resulting in the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. That in turn was followed by the **emergence of the new Republican Party** in 1860 and the onset of the Civil War. Then came “the system of 1896” and the reorientation of politics in favor of a triumphantly emergent industrial capitalism, superceded in turn by **the New Deal coalition** and the political settlement to which it gave rise. A sixth realignment is commonly added, centered on the Republican takeover of Southern politics and culminating in the **Reagan era and neoliberalism** – a politics that itself appears to be entering crisis today.



SYSTEM CHANGE AND THE ECONOMY

Taking a global view, we can look back at such changes as the shift from feudalism to free enterprise capitalism, on to several varieties of socialism in some parts of the world and the consolidation and corporatization of capitalization in others. One way to look at a system is to identify the locus of political and economic power as it is embodied in property relationships – **the question of who owns capital in a system**, exercising control over productive wealth. From this viewpoint we can see the unfolding of system change as the work of centuries, as feudalism historically gave way to capitalism and the latter fought out a contest with state socialism. As ownership and control shifted we saw the emergence of new institutional and power relationships that formed the basis of new systems of political economy.

Feudalism was a political-economic system structured above all around who controlled productive land -- namely the lords, church, and king, and not the peasants. Nineteenth-century **free-enterprise capitalism** was largely structured around small- and medium-scale competitive entrepreneurial capitalist ownership (albeit coexisting with an element of large landholding and chattel slavery). State socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was structured around state ownership. And **corporate capitalism** – the system we have today – has so far come in three broad varieties:

- *Fairly pure corporate domination of the kind that emerged in the late nineteenth century in this country (and to which the trends may now be pointing again unless a different path forward is developed).*
- *“Managed corporate capitalism” balanced by labor of the kind common in many European nations (with union strength, as in Sweden, sometimes more than double our own) and, to a lesser degree, the system mainly operating in the United States circa 1945-1980.*
- *Fascism—corporate capitalism managed by authoritarian rule of the kind that existed in Germany, Italy, and Spain during the 1930s and 1940s and (in different form) among some Latin American dictatorships until recently.*
- *“Socialism with Chinese characteristics” has so far been an odd mix of corporate ownership plus state ownership, with authoritarian rule.*



SYSTEM CHANGE IN WORLD HISTORY

Next System Project Co-Chair Gar Alperovitz often says that fundamental change -- indeed, radical systemic change -- is “as common as grass in world history.” From this vantage point, we can begin to see how **we may be on the cusp of another great transformation:**

“Ideas usually don’t matter all that much in the history of the world -- except at those points of protracted crisis where old systems have stopped working and new systems begin to take their place. At those key moments in history, ideas -- and the moral vision that animates them -- become capable of sparking far-ranging transformative change. In our own time in history, we should not dismiss the fact that the leader of one of the world’s great religions (the Pope) and an increasingly viable candidate for the presidency of one of the world’s most powerful nations (Bernie Sanders) have each put on table the need for systemic change in the direction of democratic ownership and a truly just and sustainable economy. That their message is being eagerly received by enthralled audiences suggests that we are approaching an inflection point in political-economic concern, and serves as a reminder that those who think the status quo lasts forever rarely reflect on how the opening stages of historical change often begin.”

According to [world-system theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein](#), it is important to take an even broader -- and longer -- view. For Wallerstein, a cycle of many centuries of human history is currently coming to close, and with it the world-system of global capitalism that was born of the “long” 16th century (1450-1640) as an accidental outcome of the protracted crisis of feudalism (1290-1450):

“The question is no longer, ‘how will the capitalist system mend itself, and renew its forward thrust?’, but rather, ‘what will replace this system?’ What order will emerge from this chaos? We may think of this period of systemic crisis as an arena of struggle for the successor system. The outcome may be inherently unpredictable, but the nature of the struggle is clear. We are faced with alternative choices, which cannot be spelled out in institutional detail, but may be suggested in broad outline. We can choose collectively a new system that essentially resembles the present one: hierarchical, exploitative and polarizing. There are many forms this could take, and some could be harsher than the capitalist world-system in which we have been living. **Alternatively we can choose a radically different system, one that has never previously existed -- a system that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian.”**



WHY BOTHER CHANGING THE SYSTEM AT ALL? LOOKING BACK ON THE POSTWAR GOLDEN AGE

Another way of looking at the systemic crisis we are confronting today is as the result of the [near-total victory of “neoliberalism”](#) and the Reagan Revolution in overthrowing the post-war “Golden Age” of managed capitalism and social democracy.

In the United States (as across much of Western Europe) the Great Depression and World War II set the stage for an extended period of broad-based economic growth that permitted both increased profit rates for capital and higher real living standards for labor. Thus began what the French call *les trente glorieuses*, the “thirty glorious years.” The years after 1945 saw the most powerful economic boom in modern history. Between 1945 and 1970, the U.S. economy grew at an annual rate of over 3 percent per year, and median family income came close to doubling.

Many might look back at this period and raise the question – why bother changing the system at all? **Why not simply go back to “Golden Age” postwar arrangements of liberal regulation and tax-and-spend redistribution?** If only enough power can be put together to tax corporations and the wealthy, it is hoped, we could then spend it for good things like schools, roads, bridges, health care. If only, it is hoped, we could put together enough power we could once again regulate the corporations to achieve health, environmental, safety, and other outcomes of broad social importance.

To begin with, we might note that for many the “Golden Age” was no such thing – not for women or minorities, not even for many of the blue-collar workers who were its supposed beneficiaries. Whether viewed from the standpoint of a [“People’s History,”](#) an [“Indigenous People’s History,”](#) or an [“Environmental History,”](#) the period now looks considerably darker – one marked by racism, sexism, imperialism, war, and environmental destruction.

But even granting the hard-won progress made on economic and social equality in the postwar era, there is also the likelihood, increasingly understood, that there is no going back to those arrangements. Things have clearly changed – or rather, they have reverted to the norms under capitalism that preceded the postwar era. The system can no longer be managed in the way it was at that time: such a strategy worked only under the very unusual circumstances of the half-century following the Great Depression and World War II.



Let's look for a moment at those conditions and factors that made the postwar boom possible:

First, federal **military spending sky-rocketed** to 37.8 percent of the economy in 1944, producing a massive economic stimulus six-and-a-half times that of the post-2008 Obama effort relative to the size of the economy. World War II not only ended the Depression and **put everyone back to work**; it also produced wartime savings for millions of workers, and these in turn helped fuel the boom when the savings were turned into new postwar consumer purchases.

Moreover, the high demand for unskilled workers during the war made labor union organizing much easier; and National War Labor Board regulations also helped raise wages and reduce inequality. Most important of all was that World War II radically impacted the industrial capacity of America's most important competitors and potential competitors – including, but not limited to, Germany, Japan, Britain, France, and Italy. Not only did the U.S. economy benefit from Marshall Plan and other spending to help rebuild these nations (funds were used to purchase American goods and shipped overseas on American merchant ships) but for a substantial period the U.S. had very few major global competitors.

Scholars now debate the many diverse reasons for why this period came to an end in the 1970s, but the critical point is that **it has been pretty much downhill ever since**. Labor's power in politics in particular, though still important, has cratered and shows no sign yet of coming back in trend-reversing ways. Overall union membership declined to 11.8 percent in 2011 (a return to 1929 levels), and a mere 6.9 percent in the private sector. **The implicit theory of change many progressives rely upon is thus based on a highly unusual and no longer operative set of arrangements in the half-century from the 1930s to the 1970s.** The best-selling book by French economist Thomas Piketty, "[*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*](#)," shows just how unusual this period was – the exception and not the rule in terms of trends on capital accumulation and growing income equality under capitalism.

Moreover, the demands of those on the sharp end of the current system are not for a return to postwar liberalism. Indigenous peoples from across the globe, for example, have been increasingly active on issues associated with the threat climate change poses to traditional ways of life, insisting on the necessity for broad system change in order to prevent further ecological disasters. The [2011 Declaration of the Indigenous Peoples of the World](#) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conference clearly outlines such views and their practical proposals for changes to the system.

In addition, the postwar period was hardly one to which we should aspire to return when it comes to militarism and war. Our current political economy has evolved and gathered force as a result of war and Cold War, and more recently such military and punitive responses as the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, and the corresponding growth of the National



Security State. The rise of the American Empire has powerfully affected the nature of the political-economic system -- strengthening the already existing prioritization of economic growth, giving rise to the military industrial complex, and draining time, attention and phenomenal resources away from domestic needs and emerging international challenges.

A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY — AND OF LIMITS

Finally, it is worth stepping back for a moment and refusing to be constrained by the shrunken political and economic horizons of the present. We are constantly presented with arguments by elites and the media about why things cannot be done and change is impossible. A glance at the history above – the almost constant unfolding of fundamental political-economic change if one takes the long view – refutes this naysaying.

It becomes even more difficult to sustain once we recall that today's crises -- political, social, economic, ecological -- are occurring in the **wealthiest economic system (measured in conventional terms) in the whole history of the world**. To give a sense of the possibilities: in spite of all the pain and difficulties, over the course of the 20th Century alone real income per capita, adjusted for inflation, increased roughly seven-fold in the United States. So wealthy is our nation that were income divided equally today, all families of four would receive almost \$200,000. Alternatively, of course, the workweek could be cut in half, with family income reduced on average to \$100,000 – roughly two times current median family income.

We do not know the course of future change. But it will almost certainly be influenced by the direction taken by two powerful trends.

On the one hand, the long trends of **technological change**, if continued, may be promising. Indeed, if ongoing technological change continues the previous trend of a century-long seven-fold increase, potential real (inflation adjusted) income per family of four could in theory exceed \$1 million (or, more likely, make possible a radical reduction in the work week.)

The other trend involves **resource limits**, and it is a powerfully constraining trend, especially with regard to energy, but also many other things globally (including basic grains, water, fisheries, and arable land). All this will also be impacted by global population growth – or its reduction, as is happening now throughout Europe and Russia, another unknown. It will also be impacted by specific technologies that may potentially open new directions in certain areas, especially with regard to energy, but also, at this point, to an unknown extent.



What is striking is that in either case, the reconstruction of a different kind of community is clearly the precondition for a decent and meaningful outcome: either to build forward in hopeful new ways on the basis of technological change, or, critically, to work together to manage, as a community, the challenge of resource constraints.



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PART II: SYSTEM CHANGE IN HISTORY

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PART III: ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMIC MODELS AND APPROACHES

We're all here because we want a better world, a more democratic, sustainable, and equitable one. So let's dive a little deeper into what that means and therefore what that new world might look like.

The conversation on system change will be able to build upon an impressive body of existing work and work that is currently underway. Individual researchers have begun to set down, sometimes in considerable detail, the outlines of comprehensive models or partial models of systemic alternatives. We present just a few of those models below. Additional approaches are being developed elsewhere, such as at the Tellus Institute in Boston, at the Institute for Policy Studies, at York University in Canada, at the New Economics Foundation in the United Kingdom, and in many other venues.

When we talk about a Next System, we might wish to delineate some principles on which to base our alternatives. Some possibilities:

- **Economic priorities grounded in human and ecological well-being**, not profits and GDP growth.
- **Economic democracy:** Investment and other economic decisions guided by democratically-determined politics. Economic institutions governed by and held accountable to all those affected by their activities.
- **Subsidiarity:** Economic policy and regulation fostering activity at the most localized level consistent with democracy, equity, and effectiveness. Higher-level national, regional, and global governance exercised where human and ecological well-being will be strengthened by so doing.
- **Environment:** The economy managed in such a way that preserves and restores natural capital for future generations
- **Equity:** Income and wealth equitably distributed within and among countries and communities.
- **Work:** All individuals guaranteed opportunities for decent work, living wages, and continuing self-improvement.
- **Consumerism:** Public policy shall move society in the direction of working and spending less, creating and connecting more.
- **Money and finance:** The system of money and finance operated as an essential public utility for the benefit of society as a whole.
- **International relations:** The priority of international affairs to maintain peace, security and harmony among nations and to promote global governance and international rules that further these ten principles.

Taking these principles and applying them to a system-wide model for the future, what do we get? Well, let's take a closer look at a few system models and use them to start answering that question.

1. **Gar Alperovitz's Pluralist Commonwealth:** based on the development of a robust vision of community democracy as the necessary foundation for a renewal of democracy in general. "Pluralist" to emphasize the priority given to democratic diversity and individual liberty; "Commonwealth" to underscore the centrality of new public and quasi-public wealth holding institutions that take on ever greater power on behalf of the community of the nation as a whole as the twenty-first century unfolds. [Click here](#) for a printable summary of this system model. To see what it might look like to put these principles into practice see:

- [The Cleveland Model of Community Wealth Building](#)
- *The Pine Ridge Reservation: Ecosystem of Opportunity through the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation*, see this [3 minute film](#)
- [10 Ways to Democratize the Economy](#)

2. **David Schweickart's Economic Democracy:** This model would **preserve a role for markets in goods and services** while **extending democracy into the workplace** and the linked spheres of finance and investment. In place of private ownership of the means of production with markets in capital, labor, goods and services under capitalism, or state ownership and planning under socialism, Economic Democracy has a basic economic structure of **socially-owned, worker-controlled firms** in a competitive market. The model has neither capital markets nor labor markets in the usual sense. Although workers control their own jobs and workplaces, **productive resources would become the collective property of society** and there is social control over investment. [Click here](#) for a printable summary of this model, and see our [stop-motion video illustration of the model on YouTube](#).

3. **Murray Bookchin's Communalism** is a model based on political and economic decentralization in which municipal-level assemblies would play a critical role in deepening democracy. [Click here](#) for a printable short summary of the communalist model and a present-day example of the Kurdish Rojava community putting these principles into practice.

4. **Richard Wolff's work on Worker Self-Directed Enterprises** provides a model focusing on the capacity for current forms of capitalist enterprise to incubate a more egalitarian and participatory alternative through the generalization of "**democracy at work.**" In this model, central, regional, and local governmental bodies could be owners. Communities and neighborhoods could be collective owners. The model assumes that transition from capitalistically organized enterprises

to **WSDEs will change values and consciousness**; changes in the latter will react back upon enterprise organization in an endless mutual transformation. Furthermore, money is treated as a social medium and its expansions and contractions ought to be done by WSDE banks whose decisions – like those of all other WSDEs – would be **coordinated with the democratic residential governance structures of the localities and regions** with which they interact. For more information, see:

www.democracyatwork.info

5. **Robin Hahnel’s “Participatory Economics”** model (partially co-developed with [Michael Albert](#)) revolves around **social ownership of the productive “commons”** and two types of democratic councils– **workplace councils and neighborhood consumer councils**– that, through federations, coordinate their interrelated activities through participatory planning. An annual planning procedure would decide which worker councils produce what goods and services for consumption by which consumer councils. Each worker and consumer council, and each federation of consumer councils, would begin by submitting “self-activity proposals.” An “iteration facilitation board” (IFB) would then announce estimates of social, environmental and opportunity costs of producing every good and service, as well as the expected social benefits. The IFB would adjust prices and estimates accordingly, and then new “self-activity proposals” would be submitted until a feasible plan is agreed. All **“self-activity proposals originate” with each worker and consumer council itself**. This distinguishes the participatory economy from other planning models and ensures meaningful self-management by workers and consumers. [Click here for a printable summary](#) of this model.

6. **Riane Eisler’s “Partnership Model of Whole Systems Change”** is based on four interactive components: 1) A **democratic structure** in both the family and the state or tribe, and all institutions in between; 2) **Equal partnership between women and men**, and with this, a high valuing in both women and men, as well as policy, of qualities and behaviors such as **nonviolence, nurturance**, and caregiving denigrated as “soft,” feminine,” and “unmanly” in domination systems; 3) Abuse and violence are not institutionalized or idealized since they are not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination; 4) Beliefs about human nature support empathic and mutually respectful relations. Although insensitivity, cruelty, and violence are recognized as human possibilities, they are not considered inevitable, much less moral. (A printable summary of this model is coming soon). For more information, see: www.caringeconomy.org or [click here to view a printable summary](#) of this model.

7. **Lane Kenworthy’s “Social Democratic America”** model closely resembles the actual political economies of the Nordic countries and has as its primary goals the full realization of economic security, equality (low inequality) of opportunity, and shared prosperity. It is in essence **a market capitalist model with generous and employment-friendly social policy**. Government transfers rather than taxes would play the principal role in minimizing inequality. [Click here for a printable summary](#) of this model.

8. **David Korten** proposes a model predicated on organizing to meet human needs as members of Earth’s community of life, replacing the the publicly-traded, limited-liability corporation with “living enterprises” as the basic business unit of the new economy. The model contains largely self-reliant **bio-regional economies** in which decision making is predominantly local and each bio-regional economy seeks to live within the means of its ecosystem. Higher system levels will be structured around the **principle of subsidiary** and **be supportive of predominantly local decision making**. Finance would be organized through a nation-wide network of community-based and accountable financial institutions with public “partnership banks” in every state. The overall role of government would be to provide “an appropriate framework of rules within which people, communities, entrepreneurs, and responsible investors self-organize in predominantly local markets to meet their economic needs in socially and environmentally responsible ways.”

9. **Juliet Schor’s work on Plenitude** posits a shift to a **locally-oriented economic model** based on new sources of wealth, **green technologies**, and different ways of living, including **downshifting out of the “work-and-spend” cycle** and diversifying sources of household income. The four pillars of Plenitude include time, with citizens using their newfound time affluence to invest in other sources of wealth; high-tech self-provisioning, meeting basic needs (income, food, housing, consumer goods, energy) through creative, smart, high productivity technologies; **consuming differently**, giving people more time, more creativity, and **more social connection**, while also lowering ecological footprints and avoiding consumer debt; and connection, a rebirth of community through local economic interdependence through the trading of services and sharing of assets. For more information, see:

www.julietschor.org

To see what it might look like to put some of the more localist-oriented models into practice, check out the work of [The Business Alliance for Local Living Communities \(BALLE\)](#).

10. **Gus Speth’s work on “America the Possible”** describes a vision in which a number of key transformations move us towards a new system political economy:

- *The market: from laissez-faire to powerful market governance in the public interest; from*



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commodification to reclaiming the commons,

- The corporation: from shareholder primacy to stakeholder primacy,
- Economic growth: from growth fetish to post-growth society,
- Money and finance: from money created through bank debt to money created by government,
- Social conditions: from vast inequities to fundamental fairness, from racial and other invidious discrimination to just treatment of all groups,
- Indicators: from GDP to accurate measures of social and environmental health and quality of life,
- Consumerism: from “affluenza” to sufficiency and mindful consumption
- Communities: from runaway enterprise and throwaway communities to vital local economies, from social rootlessness to rootedness and solidarity
- Dominant cultural values: from having to being, from near-term to long-term.
- Politics: from creeping corporatocracy and plutocracy to true popular sovereignty
- Foreign policy: from hard power to soft, from military prowess to real security.

For more information, see: [America the Possible, Part I](#) and [Part II](#)

PART IV. HOW TO CHANGE A SYSTEM

Typically a distinction has been made between reform, on the one hand, and revolution, on the other.

The former implies an improvement in the outcomes of a given system without fundamental changes in its underlying logic. Sometimes we work within the system advancing these kinds of reforms without even realizing it. In the case when our demands for change -- even when met -- do not fundamentally alter the architecture of the system, the very ills we sought to mitigate through our demands can be reproduced in other ways.

Revolution, on the other hand, involves a thorough and rapid change in social relations such that a new social system with new rules, institutions, and power structures comes into being. The extent to which a revolution is peaceful or violent usually depends on the reactions of those in power to the popular uprising. And for this reason, a revolution can produce unanticipated results.

Reform versus revolution, however, is far from all that needs to be said about bringing about systemic change.

How best to achieve lasting change is a hotly debated topic and the answers are not totally clear. Moreover, until we are certain about the kind of new system we'd like to institute, the path towards that system cannot be plotted in any substantial way. So pay lots of attention to the next section! For now, some of the many ways to think about making change in a system are as follows:

- *Environmentalist and renowned systems' theorist Donella Meadow explores 12 distinct points of intervention capable of generating lasting change in a system in this [essay](#).*
- *Social philosopher and New Left theorist, André Gorz explored the idea of **non-reformist reforms or structural reforms**, writing "to fight for alternative solutions and for structural reforms (that is to say, for intermediate objectives) is not to fight for improvements in the capitalist system; it is rather to break it up, to restrict it, to create **counter-powers** which instead of creating a new equilibrium, undermine its very foundations...A reformist reform is one which subordinates its objective to the criteria or rationality and practicability of a given system and policy...a struggle for non-reformist reforms—for anti-capitalist reforms—is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be. And finally, it bases the possibility of attaining its objective on the implementation of fundamental political and economic changes. The changes can be sudden, just as they can be gradual. But in any case they assume a modification of the relations of power." (Gorz, Strategy for Labor, 1967)*

- In a similar vein, National People’s Action, in their [Long-Term Agenda](#), point to the potential of structural reforms that can lead to structural transformation. Structural reform to laws, policies and rules that **change power relations** set the stage for larger-scale transformation that results in a deeper democracy and more equitable economy.
- In his book *After Capitalism*, mathematician and philosopher David Schweickart set out three conditions required in order to create transformational change. He argues that the transition from capitalism to another system will not require a thorough social restructuring, but can be carried out on a national scale by way of a few major reforms implemented by an elected radical government: “Deep change requires three conditions: first, the **old system must suffer** what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls a **“legitimation crisis.”** In the famous words of the Communist Manifesto, “the ruling class shows itself unfit to rule.” Deep change also requires **an agent**: a movement, often long in the making, dedicated to fundamental change, which suddenly gains mass appeal. Third, **this movement must be animated**, at least in part, **by a vision of concrete institutional change.**”
- In *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright lays out a method for evaluating strategies for major political-economic transitions, dividing those strategies into three types: interstitial, ruptural, and symbiotic. In broad terms, **Interstitial transformation** is described as a process that gradually undermines capitalism from within, while a **symbiotic transformation** is one that generates a positive-sum class compromise between workers and capitalists by “help[ing] solve certain real problems faced by capitalists and other elites.” Lastly, **ruptural transformations** are revolutionary ones that break completely with the old system. This typology offers a more nuanced way of thinking about fundamental change, and strategies for achieving it, than the usual dichotomy between reform versus revolution. Below is a visual representation of these ideas.

**ERIK OLIN WRIGHT’S THREE MODELS OF TRANSFORMATION:
RUPTURAL, INTERSTITIAL, SYMBIOTIC**

		POLITICAL TRADITION MOST CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH LOGIC OF TRANSFORMATION	PIVOTAL COLLECTIVE ACTORS FOR TRANSFORMATION	STRATEGIC LOGIC WITH RESPECT TO THE STATE	STRATEGIC LOGIC WITH RESPECT TO THE CAPITALIST CLASS	METAPHORS OF SUCCESS
VISION OF TRAJECTORY OF SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATIONS BEYOND CAPITALISM	RUPTURAL	Revolutionary socialist/communist	Classes organized in political parties	Attack the state	Confront the bourgeoisie	War (victories and defeats)
	INTERSTITIAL METAMORPHOSIS	Anarchist	Social movements	Build alternatives outside of the state	Ignore the bourgeoisie	Ecological competition
	SYMBIOTIC METAMORPHOSIS	Social democratic	Coalitions of social forces and labor	Use the state struggle on the terrain of the state	Collaborate with the bourgeoisie	Evolutionary adaptations

ADAPTED FROM ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF TRANSFORMATION
BY ERIK OLIN WRIGHT



- In *America Beyond Capitalism*, Gar Alperovitz explains another pathway, between reform and revolution, for transformational change in his strategy of **evolutionary reconstruction**, which he describes as a long-term process of “institutional innovation...based on the democratization of capital, beginning first at the community and state level and then moving to larger scale as time goes on...[that draws on] the development of ideas concerning the practicality, political feasibility, and importance of such innovation.” For a further elaboration of “evolutionary reconstruction” towards system change, see: [“America Beyond Capitalism: An ‘Evolutionary Reconstruction’ of the System Is Necessary and Possible”](#)

We hope that the above explorations, while far from the last word on any of these subjects, are helpful in getting you started in your own conversations on system change and search for pathways to a future beyond the failed and failing systems of the past and present!



THE NEXT
SYSTEM

TEACH-INS

PART IV: HOW TO CHANGE A SYSTEM

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