Chapter 1

WHY BE AN ANTI-CAPITALIST?

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For many people the idea of anti-capitalism seems ridiculous. After all, look at the fantastic technological innovations in the goods and services produced by capitalist firms in recent years: smart phones and streaming movies; driverless cars and social media; cures for countless diseases; Jumbotron screens at football games and video games connecting thousands of players around the world; every conceivable consumer product available on the internet for rapid home delivery; astounding increases in the productivity of labor through novel automation technologies; and on and on. And while it is true that income is unequally distributed in capitalist economies, it is also true that the array of consumption goods available and affordable for the average person, and even for the poor, has increased dramatically almost everywhere. Just compare the United States in the half century between 1965 and 2015: The percentage of Americans with air conditioners, cars, washing machines, dishwashers, televisions, and indoor plumbing has increased dramatically in those fifty years. Life expectancy is longer for most categories of people; infant mortality lower. The list goes on and on. And now, in the 21st century, this improvement in basic standards of living is happening even in the poorer regions of the world as well: look at the improvement in material standards of living of people in China since China embraced the free market. What's more, look what happened when Russia and China tried an alternative to capitalism! Even aside from the political oppression and brutality of those regimes, they were economic failures. So, if you care about improving the lives of people, how can you be anti-capitalist?

That is one story, the standard story.

Here is another story: The hallmark of capitalism is poverty in the midst of plenty. This is not the only thing wrong with capitalism, but it is the feature of capitalist economies that is its gravest failing. Especially the poverty of children who clearly bear no responsibility for their plight is morally reprehensible in rich societies where such poverty could be easily eliminated. Yes, there is economic growth, technological innovation, increasing productivity and a downward diffusion of consumer goods, but along with capitalist economic growth comes destitution for many whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the advance of capitalism, precariousness for those at the bottom of the capitalist labor market, and alienating and tedious work for the majority. Capitalism has generated massive increases in productivity and extravagant wealth for some, yet many people still struggle to make ends meet. Capitalism is an inequality enhancing machine as well as a growth machine. What's more, it is becoming ever-clearer that capitalism, driven by the relentless search for profits, is destroying the environment. And in any case, the pivotal issue is not whether material conditions on average have improved in the long run within capitalist economies, but rather whether, looking forward from this point in history, things would be better for most people in an alternative kind of economy. It is true that the centralized, authoritarian state-run economies of twentieth century Russia and China were in many ways economic failures, but these are not the only possibilities.

Both of these accounts are anchored in the realities of capitalism. It is not an illusion that capitalism has transformed the material conditions of life in the world and enormously increased human productivity; many people have benefited from this. But equally, it is not an illusion that capitalism generates great harms and perpetuates eliminable forms of human suffering. Where the real disagreement lies – a disagreement that is fundamental – is over whether it is possible to have the productivity, innovation and dynamism that we see in capitalism without the harms. Margaret Thatcher famously announced in the early 1980s, "There is No Alternative"; two decades later the World Social Forum declared "Another World is Possible". That is the fundamental debate.

The central argument of this book is this: First, another world is indeed possible. Second, it could improve the conditions for human flourishing for most people. Third, elements of this new world are already being created in the world as it is. And finally, there are ways to move from here to there. Anti-

capitalism is possible not simply as a moral stance towards the harms and injustices in the world in which we live, but as a practical stance towards building an alternative for greater human flourishing.

This chapter will set the stage for this argument by explaining what I mean by "capitalism," and then exploring the grounds for evaluating capitalism as an economic system.

What is Capitalism?

Like many concepts used in everyday life and in scholarly work, there are many different ways of defining "capitalism." For many people capitalism is the equivalent of a market economy – an economy in which people produce things to be sold to other people through voluntary agreements. Others add the word "free" before "market", emphasizing that capitalism is an economy in which market transactions are minimally regulated by the state. And still others emphasize that capitalism is not just characterized by markets, but also by the private ownership of capital. Sociologists, especially those influenced by the Marxist tradition, typically also add to this the idea that capitalism is characterized by a particular kind of class structure, one in which the people who actually do the work in an economy – the working class – do not themselves own the means of production. This implies at least two basic classes in the economy – capitalists, who own the means of production, and workers, who provide labor as employees.

Throughout this book, I will use the term capitalism in the way that combines the idea of capitalism as a market economy with the idea that it is organized through a particular kind of class relationship. One way of thinking about this combination is that the market dimension identifies the basic mechanism of coordination of economic activities in an economic system – coordination through decentralized voluntary exchanges, supply and demand, and prices – and the class relationship identifies the central power relations within the economic system – between private owners of capital and workers. This way of elaborating the concept means that it is possible to have markets without capitalism. For example, it is possible to have markets in which the means of production are owned by the state: firms are owned by the state and the state allocates resources to these firms, either as direct investment or as loans from state banks. This can be called a *statist market economy* (although some people have called this "State Capitalism"). Or, the firms in a market economy could be various kinds of cooperatives owned and governed by their employees and customers. A market economy organized through such organizations can be called a *cooperative market economy*. In contrast to these two kinds of market economies, the distinctive feature of a capitalist market economy is the ways in which private owners of capital wield power both within firms and within the economic system as a whole.

Grounds for Opposing Capitalism

Capitalism breeds anti-capitalists. In some times and places the resistance to capitalism becomes crystallized in coherent ideologies with systematic diagnoses of the source of harms and clear prescriptions about what to do to eliminate them. In other circumstances anti-capitalism is submerged within motivations that on the surface have little to do with capitalism, such as religious beliefs that lead people to reject modernity and seek refuge in isolated communities. Sometimes it takes the form of workers on the shop floor individually resisting the demands of bosses. Other times anti-capitalism is embodied in labor organizations engaged in collective struggles over the conditions of work. Always, wherever capitalism exists, there is discontent and resistance in one form or other.

Two general kinds of motivations are in play in these diverse forms of struggle within and over capitalism: *class interests* and *moral values*. You can oppose capitalism because it harms your own material interests, but also because it offends certain moral values which are important to you.

There is a poster from the late 1970s which shows a working class woman leaning on a fence. The caption reads: “class consciousness is knowing what side of the fence you’re on; class analysis is figuring out who is there with you.” The metaphor of the fence sees conflict over capitalism as anchored in conflicts of class interests. Being on opposite sides of the fence defines friends and enemies in terms of opposing interests. Some people may be sitting on the fence, but ultimately they may have to make a choice: “you’re either with us or against us.” In some historical situations the interests that define the fence are pretty easy to figure out. It is pretty obvious to nearly everyone that in the United States before the Civil War slaves were harmed by slavery and they therefore had a class interest in its abolition, while slave owners had an interest in its perpetuation. There may have been slave owners who felt some ambivalence about owning slaves – this is certainly the case for Thomas Jefferson, for example – but this ambivalence was not because of their class interests; it was because of a tension between those interests and certain moral values which they held.

In contemporary capitalism things are more complicated and it is not so obvious precisely how class interests over capitalism should be understood. Of course, there are some categories of people for whom their interests with respect to capitalism are pretty clear: large wealth holders and CEOs of multinational corporations clearly have interests in defending capitalism; sweatshop workers, low skilled manual laborers, precarious workers and the long-term unemployed have interests in opposing capitalism. But for many other people in capitalist economies things are not so straightforward. Highly educated professionals, managers, and many self-employed people, for example, occupy what I have called *contradictory locations within class relations* and have quite complex and often inconsistent interests with respect to capitalism.

If the world consisted of only two classes on opposite sides of the fence, then it might be sufficient to anchor anti-capitalism exclusively in terms of class interests. This was basically how classical Marxism saw the problem: even if there were complexities in class structures, the long-term dynamics of capitalism would have a tendency to create a sharp alignment of interests for and against capitalism. In such a world, class consciousness consisted mainly of understanding how the world worked and thus how it served the material interests of some classes at the expense of others. Once workers understood this, the argument went, they would oppose capitalism. This is one of the reasons why many Marxists have argued that it is unnecessary to develop a systematic critique of capitalism in terms of social justice and moral deficits. It is enough to show that capitalism harms the interests of the masses; it is not necessary to also show that it is unjust. Workers don’t need to be convinced that capitalism is unjust or that it violates moral principles; all that is needed is a powerful diagnosis that capitalism is the source of serious harms *to them* – that it is against their material interests -- and that something can be done about it.

Such a purely class interest-based argument against capitalism will not do for the 21st century, and probably was never really entirely adequate. There are three issues in play here.

First, because of the complexity of class interests, there will always be many people whose interests do not clearly fall on one side of the fence or the other. Their willingness to support anti-capitalist initiatives will depend in part on what other kinds of values are at stake. Since their support is important for any plausible strategy for overcoming capitalism, it is important to build the coalition in part around values, not just class interests.

Second, the fact of the matter is that most people are motivated at least in part by moral concerns, not just practical economic interests. Even for people whose class interests are clear, moral motivations can matter a great deal. People often act against their class interests not because they do not understand those interests, but because other values matter more to them. One of the most famous

cases in history is that of Frederick Engels, Marx's close associate, who was the son of a wealthy capitalist manufacturer and yet wholeheartedly supported political movements against capitalism. Northern Abolitionists in the 19th century opposed slavery not because of their class interests, but because of a belief that slavery was wrong. Even in the case of people for whom anti-capitalism is in their class interests, motivations anchored in values are important for sustaining the commitment to struggles for social change.

Finally, clarity on values is essential for thinking about the desirability of alternatives to capitalism. We need a way of assessing not just what is wrong with capitalism, but what is desirable about alternatives.

Thus, while of course it is important to identify the specific ways in which capitalism harms the material interests of certain categories of people, it is also important to clarify the values that we would like an economy to foster. This rest of this chapter will explore the values that constitute the moral foundations of anti-capitalism and the search for a better alternative.

Moral foundations

Three clusters of values are central to the moral critique of capitalism: equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity. These have a long pedigree in social struggles going back at least to the ideals of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* proclaimed in the French Revolution. All of these values have hotly contested meanings. Few people say that they are against democracy or freedom or some interpretation of equality, but many people still disagree sharply over the real content packaged into these words. Arguments of this sort keep political philosophers very busy. I will not attempt here to sort out these debates. What I will do is give an account of these values that gives clarity to the critique of capitalism.

Equality/fairness

The idea of equality is at the center of nearly all notions of social justice. Even libertarian notions of justice, which emphasize property rights, argue for equality of rights before the law. The American Declaration of Independence proclaims, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The idea of equality of opportunity is broadly accepted by most Americans and thus most people acknowledge that there is something unfair about a child born into poverty having less opportunity in life that a child born into wealth, even if they also feel there is nothing much that can be done about it.

Some ideal of equality is therefore held by most people in contemporary capitalist societies. Where people differ strongly is over the substance of the egalitarian ideal. Such disagreement animated a very lively discussion among political philosophers in the last decades of the twentieth century referred to as the "Equality of What?" debate. Is the egalitarian ideal, equality of opportunity? If so, opportunity for what? Or is the egalitarian ideal equality of resources? Equality of capabilities? Equality of welfare or wellbeing? Here is how I propose we think about equality as a value:

> *In a just society, all persons would have broadly equal access to the material and social means necessary to live a flourishing life.*

There is a lot packed into this statement. Let's break it down.

Frist, the egalitarian principle is captured by the idea of "broadly equal *access*" to something. This is a bit different from equal *opportunity*. Equal opportunity would be satisfied by a lottery, for example, but this would hardly be a fair way of giving people access to a flourishing life. Equal opportunity also suggests that the main issue is that people should have what is sometimes called "starting gate equality": so long as you begin with equal opportunity, if you then squander your opportunities, well that is just too bad. It's your fault so you have nothing to complain about. "Equal access" takes a more generous and compassionate view of the human condition. It is also more sociologically and psychologically realistic. People screw up; teenagers can be short-sighted and make stupid decisions; random events and luck play an enormous role in everyone's life for good and ill. A person who works hard, overcoming great obstacles, and accomplishes great things in life still owes much of the success to random good fortune. It is virtually impossible to make a clear distinction between things for which one really bears responsibility and things for which one does not. The idea that in a just society people should throughout their lives, to the greatest extent possible, have equal access to the conditions to live a flourishing life recognizes these sociological and psychological facts of life. Equality of opportunity, of course, is still a valuable idea, but equal access is a sociologically more appropriate way of understanding the egalitarian ideal.

Now let's look at "flourishing." There are many different ways that philosophers and ordinary people think about what it means to say a person's life is going well. Happiness is one way of doing this. In general most people say that a person's life is going better when they are happy rather than unhappy, and also that institutions that facilitate happiness are better than those that impede happiness. The pursuit of happiness enshrined in the Declaration of Independence attests to its importance. A meaningful or fulfilling life is another formulation. Some philosophers talk about welfare or wellbeing. All of these ideas are connected. It is hard, after all, to imagine a person being truly happy if they also feel a sense of meaninglessness in their life.

I use the idea of human *flourishing* as a way of capturing an all-around sense of a person's life going well. A flourishing life is one in which a person's capacities and talents have developed in ways which enable them to pursue their life goals, where in some general sense they have been able to realize their potentials and purposes. It is easy to see what this means when we think of a person's health and physical condition: a flourishing life is more than just the absence of disease; it also embodies a positive idea of physical vitality that enables people to live energetically in the world. Similarly for other aspects of one's life, flourishing implies a positive, robust realization of one's capacities, not just an absence of grave deficits.

I suspect that in practical terms it doesn't matter a lot whether we focus on happiness, wellbeing, meaningfulness, fulfillment, or flourishing when we think about a just society. These are all deeply interconnected and improving the conditions for the realization of one almost certainly has positive effects on the others.

The value of equality does not say that in a just society all people actually live equally flourishing lives. Rather, the idea is that all people have equal *access* to *the social and material means necessary* for a flourishing life. In a just society no one who fails to flourish can complain that the social institutions and social structures in which they lived obstructed their access to the material and social conditions needed to flourish.

The *material means* to live a flourishing life will vary enormously over time and place, of course, but broadly this includes adequate food, shelter, clothing, mobility, recreation, medical care, and education, among other things. In a market economy, this implies that people have adequate income to purchase many of these things. This does not imply that everyone should have identical levels of income. People

have different needs for all sorts of reasons, and thus equal access to the material means necessary for a flourishing life implies access to different levels of income. This is why the classic socialist distribution principle is "to each according to need" rather than "to each the same."

The *social means* to live a flourishing life are in many ways more complex than the material means, and any list of these social means is almost certain to contain controversial items. I would include at least the following: meaningful, fulfilling activities, typically linked to what is generally called "work"; intimacy and social connection; autonomy in the sense of meaningful control over one's own life; and social respect, or what some philosophers call social recognition. Social stigma connected to race, gender, sexuality, appearance, religion, language, ethnicity and other salient attributes of persons impedes human flourishing even apart from the way these may also obstruct access to the material means to flourish. In a just society all people have equal access to the social conditions needed for a flourishing life.

The egalitarian principle of fairness is a strong one. It states that in a just society "*all* persons" should have equal access, not just some kinds of people. Inequalities in access to the conditions to flourish rooted in race, gender, class, physical ability, religion, ethnicity, all constitute injustices. But what about nationality or citizenship? Does the word "society" mean "nation state" or does it mean the social system of cooperating and interacting people? In a globalized economy the idea of "a" society becomes quite ambiguous. Is the world as a whole the relevant "society" for the principle? This is not an easy question to answer, but the strongest form of the value of equality and fairness would extend its reach to all persons regardless of where they happen to have been born or live: it is unjust that some people, by virtue of the randomness of being born on the wrong side of a national border, have drastically less access to the conditions to live a flourishing life. The implication is that in terms of the value of equality/fairness people should be allowed to move wherever they like and that the principles of justice should apply universally. This does not, however, answer the practical question of what, if anything, can or should be done about this injustice. It may be impossible in practice to do much to rectify the injustice created by national boundaries of citizenship either because the political obstacles are too great or because the negative side effects of eliminating national boundaries would undermine other important values. But the fact that we cannot solve this problem does not mean that, in terms of the value of equality/fairness, the citizenship barriers to equal access are just.

One final issue connected to the value of equality/fairness concerns its relationship to the natural environment. There are two connected issues here. The first concerns what has come to be called "environmental justice"—the ways in which the burdens of environmental harms are distributed within a society. The value of equality/fairness implies that it is unjust for the health burden of toxic waste, pollution and other environmental harms to be disproportionately born by poor and minority communities. It is equally unjust for the adverse effects of global warming to be concentrated in poor countries, and this injustice is intensified by the fact that the carbon emissions which have led to global warming were mainly generated by activities in wealthy countries. Environmental justice, in these terms, is an additional important dimension of equal access to the material conditions to live a flourishing life.

The second issue concerns the relationship of present actions to future environmental harms. Do we owe any special consideration to future generations in terms of their access to the environmental conditions to live a flourishing life? Or does the idea of fairness strictly refer to the distribution of access among people in the world today? This is an especially salient issue for global warming where the most serious negative effects will affect future generations. This future-oriented issue linked to environmental harms can be thought of as a problem of inter-generational justice:

> *Future generations should have access to the social and material means to live flourishing lives at least at the same level as the present generation.*

This is the morally salient issue in environmental sustainability: the main reason to care about the long-term deterioration of the environment is that this undermines human flourishing in the future. It is unfair to future generations.

Democracy/freedom

I join together democracy and freedom as values. Often people think of these as rather distinct and in tension: Freedom is about the ability to do what you want without interference; democracy is about the process of imposing binding rules on everyone. Particularly if democracy is narrowly identified with majority rule, then a majority can certainly impose binding rules that trample on the freedom of people in a minority.

So, why then do I treat democracy and freedom as so tightly connected? I do so because I think both of these ideas are anchored in a core, underlying value, a value which might be called the *value of self-determination*:

> *In a fully democratic society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives.*

If the decisions in question affect me and only me, then I should be able to make them without interference from anyone else. That is what we call freedom or liberty: being able to do things without asking permission of anyone and without interference from others. But, if the decisions in question affect other people, then they should be parties to the decision as well or, at least, agree to let me make the decision without their participation. Of particular importance are decisions which impose binding, enforced rules on everyone. These are decisions made by states, and for those kinds of decisions all people affected by the rules should be able to meaningfully participate in making the rules. This is what we normally mean by democracy: control "by the people" over the use of the power of the state. But a democratic *society* (rather than simply a democratic state) implies more than this; it requires that people should be able to meaningfully participate in all decisions which significantly affect their lives whether those decisions are being made within the state or other kinds of institutions. A democratic workplace is as much a part of a democratic society as is a democratic state.

In this formulation the fundamental idea is that people should be able to determine the conditions of their own lives to the greatest extent possible. This is what self-determination means. The difference between freedom and democracy, then, concerns the contexts of actions that affect one's life, not the underlying value itself. Again, the context of freedom is decisions and actions that only affect the person making the decision; the context of democracy is decisions and actions which affect other people as well.

Now, in practice virtually every decision and action a person can undertake has some effects on others. It is therefore impossible for everyone to be a participant in every decision which affects them. It would also be monstrous for a society to attempt to move towards such comprehensive democratic participation. What we need, therefore, are a set of rules which define the socially-accepted boundary between the context of freedom and the context of democracy. One language for talking about this is the boundary between the *private* sphere and the *public* sphere. The private sphere is the sphere in which individuals are free to do what they want without involving democratic participation of all those affected by their actions; the public sphere is the sphere where directly or indirectly, all those affected by decisions are invited to participate.

There is nothing natural or spontaneous about this line of demarcation between the private and the public; it is something that has to be created through some kind of social process. This is clearly a very complex and often deeply contested task. The long political struggles over sexuality, abortion and contraception all concern the boundary between a strictly private domain of sex and the body in which each individual can freely make choices, and a public domain in which people in the broader society can legitimately interfere, especially through state regulation. Some boundaries are vigorously enforced by the state. Some boundaries are mostly enforced through social norms. Often the boundary between the public and the private remains fuzzy. In a deeply democratic society, the boundary between the public and private is itself subjected to democratic deliberation and decision.

Democracy and freedom are values in their own right, but they are also instrumental for other values. In particular, self-determination is itself important for human flourishing. As already noted, having meaningful control over one's own life is one aspect of the social conditions necessary for human flourishing.

As in the case of fairness, the democratic ideal rests on the egalitarian principle of equal access. In the case of flourishing the issue was equal access to the necessary means to live a flourishing life. Here the issue is equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions; in short, equal access to the exercise of power. This does not imply that all people actually do participate equally in collective decisions, but simply that there are no unequal social impediments to their participation.

Community/solidarity

The third long-standing value connected to anti-capitalism is community and the closely related idea of solidarity:

> *Community/solidarity expresses the principle that people ought to cooperate with each other not simply because what they personally get out of it, but also out of a real commitment to the wellbeing of others and a sense of moral obligation that it is the right thing to.*

When such cooperation occurs in the mundane activities of everyday life in which people help each other out, we use the word "community;" when the cooperation occurs in the context of collective action to achieve a common goal, we use the term "solidarity." Solidarity typically also suggests the idea of collective power – "united we stand, divided we fall" – but the unity being called for is still grounded in the principle it shares with community: that cooperation should be motivated not exclusively by an instrumental concern with narrow individual self-interest, but by a combination of moral obligations and concern for others.

The value of community applies to any social unit in which people interact and cooperate. The family, in this sense, is a particularly salient community, and in a healthy family one certainly expects cooperation to be rooted in both love and moral concern. A family in which parents made "investments" in children not because of any concern for the wellbeing of their children but only because the parents felt they would get a good financial "return on their investments" would seem to most people to violate important family values. Religiously backed moral precepts often embody this value: "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The heartfelt chant of the labor movement, "An injury to one is an injury to all" expresses this value. Neighborhoods, cities, nations, organizations, clubs, and any other setting of social interaction and cooperation are also sites for the value of community.

The salience of the value of community, of course, will vary enormously across time and space. As is often noted, in times of natural disasters, people in the affected place often come to each other's aid in

striking and self-sacrificing ways. What is called "patriotism" in times of war also can be infused with love of country and a sense of duty, both of which are connected to the value of community and solidarity. In ordinary times, for most people, the value of community can become quite thin with respect to strangers in distant places.

Community/solidarity is of value both because of its direct role in human flourishing and because of its role in fostering equality and democracy. What is sometimes referred to as a "Communitarian" view of the good society emphasizes the importance of social bonds and reciprocities for human wellbeing. Where a sense of community is reasonably strong, people are less vulnerable, they feel at home in the world, they have a more secure sense of purpose and meaning in life. A strong sense of community is a constituent part of a flourishing life.

Community/solidarity is also important for equality and democracy. It is easier to accept that all people within some social space should have equal access to the necessary conditions to live a flourishing life when you also feel strong concern and moral obligation for their wellbeing. This is why within families the principle of distribution among children is often close to "to each according to need." The stronger this sense of community is within larger political units, the more stable will egalitarian, redistributive public policies likely to be. Similarly, the value of democracy is likely to be more thoroughly realized within political units in which there is a fairly strong sense of community. Political democracy can certainly exist in a social world where people feel relatively little concern for the wellbeing of fellow citizens and politics is entirely organized around interest groups. But the quality of such democracy is likely to be fairly thin, with little space for serious public deliberation about the common good and the search for broad consensus.

There is, however, a dark side to the value community/solidarity. A strong sense of community can define rigid boundaries between insiders and outsiders. This may foster some degree of egalitarian values among insiders, but it can also support oppressive exclusion of outsiders. Nationalism often functions in this way. Solidarity can enhance the capacity for collective struggle of the KKK as well as the Civil Rights movement. The positive values associated with community – caring and obligations towards others – can also be meshed with social norms of conformity and deference to authority, which can underwrite oppressive and authoritarian relations within a social group, not simply against outsiders. Community and solidarity can thus obstruct as well as promote democracy and human flourishing. Therefore, while the value of community does figure in emancipatory ideals, much depends on precisely how it is articulated to the values of equality and democracy.

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The values of equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity are relevant for the evaluation of any social institution or social structure. Families, communities, religions, schools, and states as well as economic systems can be assessed in terms of the ways they foster or obstruct the realization of these values. And, of course, proposals for alternatives can be judged on the basis of these values as well. The next chapter will examine the how well capitalism fairs in these terms.