
An alternative to “alternatives”

There's an old joke in the US about a public prosecutor who starts to build a case against the Mafia in her city. One day she receives a mysterious visit from several large, polite, well-dressed gentlemen. They take their time to arrange themselves comfortably in chairs around her desk. After coffee is served, their leader clears his throat and begins to speak:

“Let me say first that I'm very sympathetic with what you're trying to do. You're concerned about contract killings, loan sharking, illicit gambling rings, heroin being sold on the streets. You want to do something about people's pensions being embezzled, women being trafficked for prostitution, public works contracts going to gangsters who skim off most of the budget for themselves, restaurants being burned down when they don't pay off extortionists, witnesses being threatened. You don't like any of this stuff. I understand that. Neither do I. There are big problems with this system. But what we want to know is: what's your alternative?”

The joke is funny for the same reason most jokes are funny. It brings an unspeakable truth out into the open – only to use it as a pretext for creating pleasure in the conspiratorial sharing of awareness of its very unspeakableness.

In this case, the unspeakable truth is that most people who go around asking activists for “alternatives” to the status quo are not really interested in alternatives. Or if they are, they are interested only in those “alternatives” that might benefit themselves, reinforce oppression, or fit with their own view of the world. Like the mafiosi visiting the prosecutor in her office, they are mainly just trying to bully you, because they feel threatened by what you are doing.

Examples are everywhere.

There are the parliamentarians who, facing criticisms of failed government policies that they can't answer, ask “What's your alternative?” just to change the subject.

There are the giant plantation companies who ask you what your alternative is for meeting paper demand in order to stop you from saying that the alternative involves questioning that very demand.

There are the World Bank officials who ask you “What's your alternative?” so that they can use you as an unpaid consultant on projects to build their own power, all the while cynically refusing to recognize any answers that would not provide jobs for their staff and move lots of money through the institution.

More innocently, there are the people who, instinctively more sympathetic to popular movements but taken aback by a depth of resistance they cannot understand, feel compelled to ask “What's your alternative?” because they can't see the alternatives that already exist all around them. In 1990, visiting European journalists asked Thai villagers who were trying to stop the Pak Mun dam what their alternative to the dam was. The villagers patiently replied that the “alternatives” were already there.

We have our fisheries, they said. We have our community forests. We have our fields. We have our temples, our schools, our markets. These are what the dam would hurt or destroy. Sure we have problems, they continued. But we need to deal with them in our own way, and the dam would take away what we need to do that.

The response would likely be similar in many other places where the struggle is not to find a shiny new alternative, but to protect an ongoing process of developing ones that already exist. In the joke about the Mafia, the alternative to the Mafia is simple: no Mafia. For the Thai villagers, the alternative to Pak Mun was equally simple: no Pak Mun.

The example highlights a key feature of many demands for “alternatives”: they disrespect ordinary people. “Alternatives” are usually imagined to be comprehensive, well-thought-out blueprints formulated by a few smart people for political leaders to execute, rather than unpredictable, ever-evolving processes rooted in mass resistance to unbearable injustice, full of unending sweat, pain and error, in which anybody can ask a question of anybody else.

In that respect, the usual demand for immediate “alternatives” tends to have two functions. First: to preserve the illusion that action is the implementation of ready-made plans by leaders. Ruling elites are the Mind. Everybody else is just a passive Body. And second: to prevent attempts to build genuine, open-ended alternatives, since during the process ordinary people might learn too much about how the world works. If beleaguered elites can convince you that you're not qualified to protest because you don't have a ready-made “alternative” to present, half their battle is won. They can then tie you up with requests for details and quibbles over credentials and ultimately turn you into their employee.

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts this well when he observes that the aggressive, dismissive demand for an alternative so often faced by social activists “aims precisely at precluding the true answer – its point is: ‘Say it in my terms or shut up!’ In this way, the process of translating an inchoate protest into a concrete project is blocked.”

The often-heard demand for an “alternative to capitalism” is no different. It's no coincidence that many of the people who talk about an “alternative to capitalism” – or the lack of one – are capitalists. It serves their purposes to present capitalism as if it were an intellectual “model” that can only be threatened by another intellectual “model”, rather than by the unending, 500-year-old struggles of the oppressed.

This is why, even if you have no master plan ready for the total overthrow of capitalism, capitalists like to pretend that you do. Because if you did, it would make you manageable. The word “alternative” in the question “What's your alternative?” is singular because the people asking the question usually want to draw attention away from the activities through which real political change takes place, which are plural.

How to deal with these manoeuvres? What is the alternative to “alternatives”? One step would be to make the question “What's your alternative?” into a problem wherever it arises. To meet it with the counter-question, “Alternative for whom?” To refuse to address elite-biased questions like “What's your alternative for meeting global demand for palm oil?”, instead working to make it possible for the public to be able to discuss questions like “How is the demand for palm oil being constructed and by whom, and at whose expense?”.

A related move would be to replace the question “What's your alternative?”, wherever possible, with

the question “Whose side are you on?” – as a reminder that alternatives are not just a matter for intellectuals and political leaders to decide on but are already and always being explored everywhere, and that the issue is which explorations you are going to commit yourself to.

The peremptory question “What's your alternative?” is often not only an attempt to dismiss challenges to entrenched power, but also a coded effort to coopt you into the ranks of would-be master-planners. Loyalty to democracy means refusing the invitation.

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