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Democratic Planning in the
21st Century and Beyond

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With a Foreword by
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Discovery Beyond Competition

Evgeny Morozov in conversation with Jan Groos

Introduction

The following is an edited transcript of an episode of the *Future Histories* podcast, run by Jan Groos.¹ Jan pursues *Future Histories* as a form of research practice and has, since starting the podcast in 2019, recorded a variety of episodes related to the topic of this book. The conversation with Evgeny Morozov is one of those. With his influential article ‘Digital socialism? The calculation debate in the age of big data’ (Morozov, 2019). Evgeny Morozov has played a major role in reviving the debate around questions of democratic economic planning. In the following conversation he looks beyond the often quite narrow corridor of the socialist calculation debate and stresses the importance of thinking about alternative forms of discovery and the production of the new.

The extended audio version of the conversation can be accessed through the link provided in the endnote.

Evgeny Morozov in conversation with Jan Groos

Jan Groos:

There’s a lecture you gave at Berkeley (Morozov, 2021) in which you state that the left has a problem with making sense of its own project and specifically that there is an ‘inability of the left to make sense of digital technologies and what to do with them’. Related to that you ask: ‘what should their [the left’s] future be other than just defending the welfare state and insisting that they can humanize capitalism?’ I’m very much interested in both of these tasks, making sense of a possible broader project of

Evgeny Morozov:

the left as well as making sense of the role of digital technologies for such a project. What are the main challenges surrounding both of these tasks and how are they related to each other? Let's first tackle some of the problems of the left and then we can talk about technology, because I think ultimately the reason why the left has not been able to come up with a more exciting plan for how to use technology is because it got stuck in a certain intellectual and political trap. I don't think that any forward thinking about technology can emerge, before we get it out of that trap. Traditionally, the left, or at least the radical left that's not liberal Keynesianism, has inherited this idea that its task is to figure out how to deploy the tools of planning and all the associated knowledge, techniques and repertoires in order to show that the market does a suboptimal job at allocating resources. So the project of the more hardcore left has been essentially to show that you can build alternative rationalities of allocating goods and resources that would beat the rationality of the market. And to some extent it has been done with various success in places like the Soviet Union, by relying on all sorts of techniques like input-output methods and so on (Heyer, in this volume). The temptation within that tradition, of course, is to think that now that we have more tools and techniques of organizing knowledge, including those of big data and artificial intelligence, we should essentially try to recover that focus on allocating goods and resources and turbocharge it with these new techniques. And the objective is to show the neoliberals, who have shifted this debate into this knowledge-intensive dimension thanks to people like Hayek (1945) and before him Mises (1922), that they got it wrong, that the market is suboptimal and that there is a better way to do it, that we can have a better allocative rationality. This is what some of the most tech-friendly leftists imagine the task of the left to be.

I, for one, remain sceptical that this task should retain the focus that it has retained within that cohort. I don't even think that it's a mainstream focus of the left, to be honest. I think that the left that has not opted for Keynesianism has opted for some kind of Hayekian view that markets are better at organizing knowledge and that maybe we should just focus on somehow cleaning up afterwards. And the left that is still thinking about something that goes beyond the market or some kind of Keynesian multiplier is trying to recover, improve and turbocharge the toolkit of Soviet planning. The conclusion I have reached after thinking about these issues for quite a few years now is that there is so much more for the left to do with these technologies if it slightly tweaks the initial question with which it starts this operation. And the question with which it starts this operation now, I think, is still primarily focused on how to satisfy human basic needs like housing, food security and so on. There is, of course, a huge debate on the left around these questions. How do you count needs? How do you quantify them? How do you qualify them? Are they transhistorical? Are they permanent? Do they change? That's a whole debate of its own and I don't want to take any position in that debate in this conversation. But ultimately, I think as long as you retain your focus within this needs paradigm, if you will, you are not going to ask truly exciting questions that will allow you as a leftist to win over the neoliberal camp and their vision of the market. Because the neoliberal vision of the market is no longer about the allocation of goods as it was at the beginning of this debate, the so-called socialist calculation debate, where the discussion was primarily about which of the two systems does a better job of satisfying the needs of the populace, whether it's the market or whether it's the plan. I don't think that the neoliberals are still arguing about needs, even though the leftists still are. For neoliberals of

the more sophisticated kind, the market became something else entirely. To them it is a way of organizing the journey into the unknown, it's a way of assuming and allowing more complexity into our social affairs. For someone like James Buchanan (1975), it's even an instrument of becoming and allowing people to discover who they really are and who they want to be. So the market is no longer about satisfying basic needs. This, I would argue, is what accounts for the buy-in and legitimacy of the market as a tool of organizing society. For the more sophisticated end of the neoliberal debate, markets are not tools of organizing economies, they are infrastructures of organizing civilization. As long as the left doesn't present an equally powerful vision of its infrastructure for organizing civilization and not just allocating raincoats and beds, it will never be able to defeat neoliberalism, at least ideationally. This is the background. Any of these points could be their own discussion, of course, but this is a brief summary of my position, without yet giving you any hint as to what this alternative project of the left might be.

I think that the fight that the left is fighting has no opponent, because the neoliberals have moved on and so probably has the general public. Much of this discussion about how you can satisfy basic needs using AI and Walmart and Amazon-like planning is a debate that the sophisticated neoliberals who have engaged with socialist calculation debate don't even need to hear. If you read somebody like Buchanan, for example, writing about computers in the early 1990s, then he will tell you point blank that computers can maybe arrive at a perfectly planned economy, but that computers will still not give you the possibility of exploring who you truly are, of providing this element of becoming and discovery like the market does. This is their argument as to why socialism cannot win. And what I'm saying is that the

Jan Groos:

answer of the left with regards to big tech, AI, cloud computing and infrastructures has to provide an answer to that critique.

Let us try to pick this apart a bit. I am wondering to what extent we are discussing a successful myth, a neoliberal narrative so to speak, and to what extent we are talking about an actual ability to bring about something new. Depending on what we are discussing, different solutions have to be considered and to a certain degree I'm wondering why we should accept this Hayekian myth as a starting point in the first place. It is so extremely narrow and easily disproved by pointing towards the many inventions that are not really based on monetary incentives and market competition. And when it comes to the public imaginary, it seems to me that non-market based discovery is firmly being recognized within a broader public imagination as well. The stereotypical inventor in novels, films, comics and so on, used to be more of an intrinsically motivated nerd figure and not the business type who primarily seeks profit. In this case the business type only comes into the picture afterwards, when the invention has to be brought to the market. But if this is the case and discovery is not actually the problem, because there are these intrinsically motivated nerd types, then this would mean that what we need most are alternative modes of allocating funds and democratizing investment, in order to then effectively bring about this huge potential for the new, which seems to be a somewhat inherent feature of human potential. I would argue that, on a worldwide scale, this potential is extremely untapped, not the least because venture capital, for example, has an extreme bias with regard to flowing money to their own kind regardless of actual ability and talent. So, do you think it is a narrative that we are combating, or is it an actual ability of market competition to really bring about the new?

Evgeny Morozov:

I think you are framing it in a certain way, and I'm not sure that these are the only options. I understand what you're saying, but I don't think that the focus on invention is necessarily the correct one, because the whole point of linking it to becoming is that you can also account for the consumer side of things and not just for the inventor side of things. For the consumer side neoliberals would make the argument that having the market as the infrastructure of modernity is precisely what allows you to discover what you really want, to express and eventually satisfy your needs in a way that has not been done before, because these needs were not even in your head. So you can, of course, argue that there are all sorts of ways to do it differently and, of course, there are. I'm just saying that it's not just the story of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur (Schumpeter, 1976) inventing something in the garage. I mean, there are bigger things at stake here. I think with regards to the story told by neoliberals, if you account for the consumption side and the production side and if you also account for a very important element of it, which is scale, you get a better picture. Because ultimately the story that somebody like Hayek would tell you is that, sure, you can have solidarity and altruism in a small community or in a village where everybody knows each other, but as you start scaling things up and you have urbanization and modernization, it becomes very hard to scale these mechanisms of solidarity as well. So the additional factor in the neoliberal story, of course, is the process of modernization. Now you have the cash nexus that penetrates and intermediates everything in a way that wasn't there before. It provides certain benefits of which the ability to live in a modern world, where things are discovered and where new things are produced by the behaviour of both consumers and entrepreneurs, is one. Do I think this story is partly accurate? Yes. Do I think that

this is the only way in which you can account for discovery or do I think there are different possibilities of discovery, becoming and scaling up the process of modernization in a way that bypasses the market? Of course, I think it's possible to do it differently. I think the way we should approach this neoliberal story is to historicize it rather than dismiss it.

During the Cold War the central state was set up as the neoliberal punching bag alongside Keynesianism, and the neoliberals treated it as if everybody involved in government spending was more or less one step away from slipping into communism and turning into the Soviet Union. But this is, of course, a false premise. Why are these the only options? You need to go beyond this narrow frame. Then a more complex and sophisticated vision of society becomes possible, where you can have more social coordination among people, actors and institutions that were not previously in touch with each other. And these mechanisms do not require any mediation by the price mechanism and the price system. The neoliberal argument is instead that the price system is a necessary intermediary to coordinate goods and needs. The coordination I am talking about, however, can be done directly and without the aid of any market. It is done all the time, for example within the family. Parents don't set up an auction or create a market to decide who picks up the children from school. A simple exchange of information via Messenger is sufficient. It happens all the time and that should prompt some questions in our mind. What are the prerequisites and possibilities for scaling this up? How can we make these forms of coordination richer? How can we make sure that things that have previously been mediated through the market can now be mediated through other types of social coordination? Maybe they need funding and infrastructures and the kind of risk-free environments in which to develop.

Essentially the argument should not be that the market doesn't work, because it does, rather it should be that the market produces massive costs which are partially unaccounted for, even by neoliberals. And the organizing religious myth at the core of neoliberalism is that you only have two options, the market and the state, and there is nothing else in between, and if you don't use the market, you'll eventually end up with a Gulag. This, of course, is not true, but I also think the story told by neoliberals is partly correct. What is correct is that you can have a bunch of small entrepreneurs who can treat everything as a black box, because the market system and the price system allows them to. They don't need to know why there is an earthquake in Sri Lanka or why there are suddenly a bunch of refugees driving up the prices of shelter accommodation. They don't care why, they just need to know where the price will be moving and, since the price will be moving, they can take action and other counterparts can take other action. And yes, you can run society as a black box, and by running it as a black box you can essentially coordinate effectively with all sorts of, to use a term from neoclassical economics, externalities. Now the question is if we really need markets to do that or if there can be alternative infrastructures of social coordination, discovery and becoming to do the job? Once you pose the question that way, then your programme should be to develop a good answer to this aspect of the neoliberal programme and not the question of satisfying basic needs by giving everybody a coat and a bed.

Jan Groos:

What are the mechanisms and infrastructures that we need to bring about in order to provide for this type of alternative coordination that is able to deliver at the level of abstraction that you are describing?

Evgeny Morozov:

The question should be: why? Why do you want to do that? What is the goal? There are multiple ways to answer this question.

One goal might be that you want to generate alternative ways of generating value, right? A kind of socialist value that is not capitalist. This would mean to have people engage in social coordination with each other, whose social being, if you will, is productive in a non-capitalist way, in order to create something that can then be valorized by society as such. This would also be used for satisfying the very basic human needs that are currently satisfied through the market. This answer would point towards a more, I don't want to say economic, but a very, let's say, social reproduction-like rationale, right?

Another goal might be that we think that, by facilitating all these ways of engagement, collaboration, coordination, and so forth, we are advancing society forward. That we think that it will result in a society that will be many steps above where it was before because, for example, you would be able to cure cancer or avoid the next COVID, and so forth.

Yet another argument could be that people should be able to form all sorts of groups and communities, pursue whatever lifestyle they want at any scale and society should facilitate that by providing infrastructures and opportunities to do so. This would obviously require a slightly different set of interventions. In neoliberal thought the market serves all these functions. It is an allocative device and an infrastructure of seeking and allowing for greater complexity of social interaction, and it's a device which, for better or worse, allows people to withdraw and form their own communities and live as they want, with all sorts of constraints and restraints. There are probably many other functions, and I think that when people on the left are posing this question, they need to understand what part of it they are trying to address. Maybe they want to address all three or four, but I'm not going to give you an answer that from the get-go

is going to solve all these problems. All I can tell you is that it seems obvious to me that the basic story accepted by the neoliberals, but also by many people on the left, that the choice between more market or more state is incorrect. There are already plenty of ways we coordinate differently. If you look at a basic school, there is a lot of complexity because there are a lot of students and teachers and rooms and activities. That problem of complexity is solved with a very simple device called the timetable, which, as far as I'm concerned, is neither an example of the market nor an example of the state. Essentially it is a part of tech infrastructure that greatly reduces complexity and allows for social coordination when none was possible before. We have hundreds of such devices in everyday life, and we have maybe even thousands of them, and the question then is can we have more? Yes. Can they be more advanced? Yes. Would our life be more complex, more interesting, more sophisticated, and not depend on the market if we had more and if they were more advanced? Yes. Once you answer 'yes' to all of that, then you can start asking questions about what our broader tech infrastructure should look like. What legal facets should it have? What property regime should govern it? How much money should be put into it? These are the kinds of questions I would be asking. In my opinion, asking the question of what should replace it in the abstract doesn't make a lot of sense without first posing the questions about why, for whom, and with what purpose.

Jan Groos:

You already mentioned different functions of what markets supposedly can do. What are the functions that you think should be replaced? You suggested that maybe all of them could be replaced, but what are the ones that we should pick up first? And what then are the concrete infrastructures, the concrete modes of engagement that we can develop in order to bring about these alternative mechanisms?

Evgeny Morozov:

Maybe you could give examples that exceed the timetable and are scalable in different forms in order to provide modes of engagement that are able to replace certain functions of the market. From the three functions of the market I've outlined and mentioned, it's obvious to me that I am completely opposed to making the market the overall infrastructure of modernity, if you will. So I don't want the market to be the tool through which we move and advance forward. I think it's a completely mad bet to do it this way. So clearly, markets should not be instruments of reducing complexity, of organizing different types of coordination among social groups, of allowing new things to be discovered in a structured way. Now, am I against markets as allocative devices in certain limited cases? No, I'm not. I think markets, once they are well-designed and once they are supervised, controlled, and monitored, can deliver. Once you know what to expect of them and if you monitor how well they're functioning, you can have them all you want within this very limited focus, this very limited agenda. Now, beyond that, I don't have a great technocratic vision, because I don't think that vision should be technocratic. I think that vision should be managerial.

There is another dimension that I didn't really make clear in my previous essays, which I will make clear in the book I'm currently working on. If I think of traditional socialists in the European sense, the social democratic movement, the workers movement and communism as well, I think of them as movements that seek simplicity in the economic sphere. And planning is one way to get at it. You make sure that things are under control and that you know what goes where and control and monitor the inputs and outputs. It's a system that you might think is complex, but you're trying to make it simple. And you're using all sorts of tools, technologies,

techniques of knowledge and so forth to arrive at that simplicity. Capitalists, even Keynesians, do not share this view, this approach towards complexity. They accept by and large that the system is complex. And they think that you can find ways to strive in its complexity. In big corporations complexity is dealt with by hiring managers who possess a skill set which allows them to handle the complexity of the given situation. It is not dealt with by trying to make it simple by reducing it to chunks that your system can digest, which I think is the socialist default temptation. Therefore, I would suggest building a system with a more managerial outlook rather than insisting on simplicity. This means that the infrastructures we need would have to make it easier to manage things. Managers try to anticipate the world as complex as it is without making it simpler, therefore infrastructures of prediction, modelling, simulation, and so on, are needed. I would argue that socialists have to go even further than that. They have to deliberately make it more complex. They have to take it upon themselves to make sure that the world is messier, more chaotic and crazier than it was before they started working. I mean, many socialists succeed in that just because of bad management, but I would argue that that has to be done structurally. And this is what socialism is about, allowing for this complexity. It's about allowing people to live in ways that they want outside of the market, outside of whatever mentality and subjectivity is imposed on them by this invisible Leviathan, as some people call the market. We want to have all this immense variety of behaviours, lifestyles, forms of lives, however you want to call it. The task is to allow for this complexity while at the same time making sure that the ship doesn't sink and making sure that the ship doesn't sink is what really makes it complex. Here is really where technology, big data and everything else can help, but not help by planning in

the old sense of the word, but predicting and managing and then delegating the functions further down the line so that you don't have to centralize all the management in the hands of the Politburo. Now, this is how it works in the abstract. I'm not naive enough to think that in today's geopolitical milieu, you can have as much decentralization as I would wish personally, because even developing all these infrastructures of prediction, anticipation and management would require the pursuit of a far more autonomous technology and science policy than the hegemonic powers of today would be happy with. So it will be a trade-off. So I'm not naively proposing that we just have a bunch of communes interrelated with each other through a giant network, but I think as a kind of a horizon of where we want to be, that's not a bad vision.

Jan Groos:

When it comes to the way in which you frame your overall argument it is interesting to me that you emphasize the aspect of discovery so much. To be honest, specifically with regard to a broader public, my guess would be that questions of existential security and also the ecological question would probably be much higher on the list. And when it comes to the question of discovery one could easily argue for a form of discovery through existential security since, if you simply bring people into the position where they do not have to hustle the whole day in order just to get through, then there's a huge potential of creativity that would be set free.

Evgeny Morozov:

I understand what you're saying. And a lot of people have made that case with regards to the welfare state. But I just think that ultimately it's a much bigger battle than a battle between neoliberalism and whatever succeeds those who win the socialist calculation debate. Essentially, it's a debate about action. I would argue that you have more or less the same theory of action underpinning both neoclassical and

Austrian economics and to some extent also much of social science in the form of rational choice. And this is a very simplistic theory of action. It starts with Weber (1930), who partly borrows it from Menger (1981) and a bunch of other economists of the first-generation Austrian school and it goes something like this: we are all rational, we have goals, then we find the most rational ways of fulfilling them. That's basically it. And if we find a more efficient way of fulfilling these goals, then this is innovation. And the person who does that is an entrepreneur, which basically means to always be on the lookout for more efficient means of pursuing given ends. And that's a theory of action that I would argue, and I'm not the only one making that case, underpins most of the theories of socialism in the actual praxis in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, as well. If you look at Lange (Lange and Taylor, 1938) and everybody else, that's how they think about action. But this is wrong. It is wrong, because it doesn't account for people changing goals along the way. And it doesn't account for much of the stuff that happens in everyday life. I start doing something, I do it, then I understand I need to do something else. Then I realize it's all wrong, I need to do something else entirely. This is what human action is like. Unless you build a political system that accounts for these changes, you're going to end up wasting 90 per cent of human potential and human creativity, which is what really makes us humans as opposed to automatons and algorithms. Currently our social system is not optimized to take advantage of the sparks of creativity that really drive us and that make us human, because it has no alternative to channelling our desires and incentives into the price system. If we were to build an alternative system that would actually account for how humans really are, it would require very different theories of action, maybe informed by pragmatism, maybe informed by

something else. There are many alternatives out there. Once you build an appropriate social system for that, I think the effects and benefits you're going to harvest will far exceed what the current welfare state could accomplish through universal basic income. That's what I'm talking about, but I don't think we are there, yet, in the sense that I don't think that people on the left are even interested in this question. Do you disagree? Tell me. Maybe there are some underground circles that I'm not aware of.

Jan Groos:

I think that people are interested in so far as I think there's a similarity between the way that you pose the problem and a certain sense of frustration, at least on my part, with the way in which the debate around democratic economic planning is currently framed (Groos, in this volume). Because in my view, even though I'm obviously very much interested in the debate, I do think that the scope of the planning debate is far too narrow. So I think there is an interest in moving beyond this fixation on markets as information processes, at least on my part. The way that I try to approach this is through the lens of alternative arts of government (Groos, in this volume), which is a way for me to ask different questions towards this complex of problems. This, for example, leads to questions of markets as sites of veridiction and production of truth and so on and it provides a very different set of questions and a different set of problems that we need to engage with and bring up alternative ways to approach it. So I would say there is an interest in thinking about these things in different ways. At the same time I think I do maybe have a different timeline. I would say the first thing would be to provide some form of universal basic service and existential security. And then, on top of that, we should build these different kinds of infrastructures of discovery, so to speak, because I think that they can only be harnessed if the

material basis is given for the people, who will basically have to have time in order to engage with it. So this might be a slightly different kind of timeline.

Evgeny Morozov:

I think it's not just the timeline. I really think that the social theory accepted in mainstream leftist circles is broken. It's broken because the theory of action underpinning it is broken. Unless this is fixed there cannot be a robust theory that will be able to speak about modernity, industrialization, postmodernism, and so on. You may say none of it is relevant. We just want to make sure that people have tramps [free public transport] and enough food to eat. And that's fine. That's a fine perspective to take ...

Jan Groos:

Evgeny Morozov:

... it's not either or.
... well, sure, it's not either or, but if it's not either or, then you're asking for the low-hanging fruit. I mean, who on the left is going to argue against universal basic services or universal basic income, if it's done in a way that will enhance the welfare state as opposed to a libertarian Friedmanesque (Friedman, 1962) version. So I see it as a default. To me, that's not even an issue, to be honest. To me, the issue goes deeper. If you engage with the German-speaking world and you take somebody like Jürgen Habermas, who is the reference point for German social democracy, whether you want it or not, then you'll see that Habermas (1981) has a theory of action that is very simple. It says the world is getting more and more complex – in that sense he agrees with Hayek and Luhman – and the only way to reduce this complexity is by relying on markets and by relying on law, so essentially money and the legal system. There is nothing else. And then all that can be done is to sometimes push back against the encroachments of all that complexity on the life world. For Habermas this can be done through traditional liberal institutions and the media. And that's a story accepted by and large by social democracy.

I would argue though that this is not true as it completely leaves out the most important mechanism of social coordination and reducing complexity, which is information technology. There is no need to rely on money or law. Once you understand that complexity can be reduced in very different ways, then you understand that all sorts of other things become possible. You don't really need to buy all of the bourgeois liberal political institutions we inherited from the French Revolution whole scale, because you can have people organizing and still have all the complexity that you want and all of the rights that they want, but you can do it outside of the traditional money system with banks and legal system with laws and bureaucracies. And I think that, unless you go and piece by piece analyse and understand what the mental and intellectual building blocks are, we're going to end up reusing and recycling neoliberalism. Because to some extent when it comes to non-communicative action in Habermas, that's what he does. The only way you account for these creative sparks of action, which I mentioned earlier, in mainstream debate is through the concept of entrepreneurship. And then you have to invent all sorts of entrepreneurship. We have moral entrepreneurship, ideas entrepreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship, religion, everything is entrepreneurship now, because we have no way to account for truly new creative non-teleological behaviour in domains that are not the market. The problem with neoliberalism is that everything has to be channelled through the market and therefore it has to become an entrepreneurial venture. And I think it's just dumb. But this will continue spreading unless somebody stands up and says, look, you're basically working with the wrong concept. The Austrian concept of entrepreneurship doesn't even describe entrepreneurship itself, because it cannot tell you about entrepreneurs

that suddenly decide to, I don't know, switch from for-profit to non-profit status, pursue social entrepreneurship or completely change their goals or completely reinvent themselves. With entrepreneurship, you're still tied to the idea that these people need to make something and that they're imprisoned by the price system and the only innovations they can introduce is in the techniques of production.

So all I'm saying is that I think it's not either or, on that I agree with you, but I do think that we need to completely rebuild social theory block by block to account for complex behaviour. We need a different complexity, a non-neoliberal complexity favourable to the core leftist ideals and ideas. And some of those ideas have to do with a diversity of lifestyle and diversity of life forms producing fantastic social effects that will be disruptive, progressive, and it will move society forward. The kind of effects that we currently attribute to the market.

Jan Groos:

Now you mentioned again that one of the tools that we would need to use, a tool that should be in our toolbox, but is not yet utilized in order to bring about these alternative modes of coordination, would be digital technologies. Can you sketch in more concrete terms how specifically digital technologies can be of use in this task?

Evgeny Morozov:

Yeah, but again, you will find it very banal. If one community will be happy to use an abacus and a timetable, and another one would want an AI, I mean, great. All we can do as critical intellectuals is to look at the current tech landscape and see which parts of it make such a project unlikely or not favourable. We can look at them in terms of use, but also, for example, if they allow surveillance, if they require people to pay for them with their data or with money and so on. So you can make a critique based on use and praxis, so to say, or you can bring forward a critique based on what the non-state ownership of these infrastructures,

for example in fields like education, healthcare and so on, mean geopolitically in the current economic conjuncture. You would want your basic communication, education, healthcare, transportation, to be somehow run in a democratic way, where the policy decides on how to offer it, how to structure it, how to reform it, which you would not be able to do if you integrate Palantir [a US data analytics company with strong ties to intelligence services] into your health data and so on. You will not be able then to later kick them out for all sorts of reasons, contractually and infrastructurally. So this is a different side of critique then. It has nothing to do with praxis, because you can even buy into it and say that Google offers you a fantastic tool, like a Google Calendar. You can even accept that argument on the level of use and praxis, but you can then strike it down and strike it out based on the geopolitical meaning of delegating so much power to a foreign company that you cannot control. I think that these are the criteria through which this has to be thought through. But beyond that, I just think you will end up at a level of generality that will tell you that yes, overall, it's better to have infrastructures that are generative, so you can build on top of them in an easier way than infrastructures that are closed. This is the truth we've learned in the last 50 or 60 years. Is it always the case? No, because there are tradeoffs. And some of those tradeoffs may have to do with security, with the fact that you just don't have access to technologies because somebody is not selling them to you, which is now happening in China with microchips. This is a constraint and you have to live with that constraint. So I don't really think that you can arrive at a point beyond that, I don't think you can arrive at a set of more specific normative criteria that you want to have in this tech infrastructure, at least I cannot. Because, ultimately, it has to be

secondary to a political project. And unless you have a political project, this infrastructure is not going to help.

Jan Groos:

There has been a time in which there was a conjunction between a large-scale leftist political project and a novel techno-infrastructure approach. When it comes to examples of large-scale techno-political infrastructures from the left which have tried to provide alternatives to both capitalist market economies and hierarchical central planning, the Cybersyn project sticks out in many ways (Medina, 2014). In preparation for our conversation today I listened to all of the six Massey lectures by Stafford Beer on 'Designing freedom' (1973). A lot of what you said in our conversation today resonates with the ideas that we know from the work of Stafford Beer, and I would like to make the link to that body of work and the historical example of Cybersyn. You have worked on the topic extensively in different formats.² Could you start by giving an overview of what Project Cybersyn is, and then go into how it is relevant for your thinking about alternatives today?

Evgeny Morozov:

It's a good question, but I'm afraid I have to disappoint you.

Jan Groos:

[*laughing*] Whaaa?

Evgeny Morozov:

[*laughing*]

Well, I don't think that Project Cybersyn itself is necessarily very relevant, because essentially, if you really want to be honest historically, you have to take it for what it was. Cybersyn essentially was a system that would allow a ministry, or a state-run corporation, to run a bunch of companies that were being nationalized in a way that would be scalable. So that's all it was. And it wasn't some great insight that we need to move from central planning to managerialism of the kind I was describing. It was just that the circumstances were like that. They couldn't move to central planning, even if they wanted to, and they couldn't exit the

market because of the political conjuncture on the ground in Chile. So they were stuck with these companies buying and selling things on the market, but being state companies that needed to be managed in a way that would soon involve the workers, and nobody really knew how exactly that would happen. So this is Cybersyn. This doesn't mean that the ideas circulating in that milieu don't have anything to recommend to us. I think they do. Not necessarily ideas about cybernetics, but ideas about technological dependence and the way in which technology plays a certain role in the geopolitical order. And this is actually the focus of my more recent work looking at Chile and, to some extent, Brazil of the 60s and 70s. In Stafford Beer himself there are many elements that are interesting and that can and should be integrated with a certain type of socialism. But it's a certain type of socialism that I think itself is in a minority position. And it's a socialism that sees complexity as a good thing and tries to embrace non-neoliberal complexity and live with it and profit from it. But having studied Stafford Beer very closely, having spoken to many of his friends and colleagues and family and having spent a lot of time in his archives, I also don't want to overstate the case. Beer was a management theorist who, by coincidence, ended up working in Allende's Chile, which changed his life. But it was not a conscious effort to think through how to rebuild socialism through cybernetics. It doesn't mean that there weren't other people who have tried to think about this question, and there have been some (Gerovič, 2002; Rindzevičiūtė, 2015). Stafford Beer, however, is essentially a management theorist. His ideas can be applied to other domains though, and this is exactly what happened in Chile. His body of thought can be applied in domains that have nothing to do with corporations. This is, I think, the part of cybernetics that remains relevant.

Jan Groos:

Evgeny, at the end, I always ask the question: if you think about the future, what makes you joyful?

Evgeny Morozov:

I've listened to your podcast, I should have prepared for this question. What makes me joyful? I mean, ultimately, I think that there are, how should I put it. *[pauses for a significant moment]* Yeah, I don't really know. *[pauses to think]* So, nothing makes me joyful in the very specific sense, because I think optimism is the kind of luxury that we cannot really afford at this point. But let me think about it some more. *[pauses again]* Well, I mean, I don't want to sound like one of those accelerationist guys celebrating the power of technology to solve all these questions, but I do think that if there is a silver lining to the kind of rise of big tech in the last 10, 15 or 20 years, it's that it showed us that so much social coordination is possible in a completely non-market way. And we have not realized that yet. Think about all the tools, all the apps, that all these people in Silicon Valley and elsewhere that are obsessed with productivity, with collaboration and coordination are using. I mean, yes, you might be paying something for them, but what they probably don't realize is that ultimately, they're not coordinating through the price system. I mean, they're using the price system to get access to a non-market system of coordination. So, in a way Silicon Valley has consistently shown us that collaboration and coordination happens outside of the market. And with enough money being poured into it, it can become even deeper and better and faster and more efficient. And, in that sense, that is the best argument against relying on the market to facilitate social coordination a la Hayek that we have seen. And that does make me optimistic, but that requires somebody to see. And if a tree falls in the forest, then there is nobody to see it. So if people will be able to see that element of it, great. But I think, right now, the only

thing we have seen in this phenomenon, by and large in the public debate is the opposite, is the idea that the market is so much better than the non-market mechanisms in building these cool things. The point is what these new technologies of coordination allow us to do and what they allow us to do is to completely bypass the market when it comes to coordinating.

Jan Groos:

That's so interesting that you frame it in this way now, at the end again. Because leaving aside the too narrow focus within the planning debate, at least this point, that there is potential in these types of non-market coordination, I think this is absolutely part of the revived planning debate. The fact that these technologies provide a potential for some form of alternative coordination definitely features in *Future Histories*, for sure.

Evgeny Morozov:

Sure, sure, sure. This question, Jan, gets us to the heart of it. The question then becomes, what do you need this coordination for? And I think that this is a philosophical question. And for a lot of people, including, I would say most of the people involved in the democratic planning debate, this coordination by and large is just a way of fulfilling the need to distribute and allocate goods, because this is the primary focus, right? They're not really stepping into the world of discovery, becoming creativity and so forth. Because, ultimately, it's almost like they operate with a Maslow pyramid of some kind, right? Marx makes a similar distinction when he's talking about the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, right? Even if you stick closely to Marx you have to admit that he slightly neglected the realm of freedom in this thinking. Maybe his idea was some kind of a liberal interpretation of everybody to their own devices. That as long as we coordinate production in the workshop in a democratic way, what you do when you hunt and drink wine and write poetry in the afternoon doesn't matter and we shouldn't think about it. I think

that's a mistake. So if there is one big message, I'd like to leave you with, it's that I think it's a mistake because, in a sense, the neoliberals understood that it's that element that accounts for the most exciting parts of modernity. So this is the stuff that really gets people excited about technology, cities, urbanization, modernization, and so on. It's not the mere satisfaction of basic needs. And the neoliberals argue that the market is key to providing this element. So this is one reason why I think the left should engage with planning in the realm of freedom more than it has. And the second reason is that I do think that the realm of freedom, once organized properly, is productive of value, in the non-Marxist meaning of the term, and that value can then feed back to satisfy the needs in the realm of necessities. And that's, to some extent, what Silicon Valley has done. They allowed you to do whatever you want in your everyday life. They get all the data through your devices about what it is that you do, and then they monetize it. And then they do whatever they want with that money. If you really want to have a socialist biopolitics, that's a good candidate. They are appropriating that and making sure that value is generated from that, not just from individual everyday life, but also from collectivity, because we all engage in it collectively. And once analysed collectively, of course, this data has enormous value when it comes to traffic analysis or epidemiological trends and so forth. But that comes from us being in the realm of freedom, by and large, or at least in the realm of social reproduction, if you really want to be middle-groundish about it. So in that sense, I do agree that questions like this have attracted the attention of people on the left. I just think they're asking them in the wrong register.

Jan Groos:

But, intuitively, if you go to a person who is now struggling in subsistence and you ask them,

is it either the realm of necessity that should be covered first or should we immediately jump into the realm of freedom, I'm pretty sure that they will say please, let's start with the realm of necessity.

Evgeny Morozov:

I don't think that that's the correct way to think about it, because I don't think that dichotomy is accurate. You're not going to get very far if you really pose the question this way, because once you start with both of them separated like that, which assumes a division between work and non-work that's very strict, that's separate, where value is produced in the workplace, then of course you're going to end up with the most obvious conclusion. We need to get away from this separation because most of the people on the left who did think about the realm of freedom end up saying that we need to reintroduce the realm of freedom into the realm of necessity. The way Marcuse would, for example, propose that the factory work should be like a playground. I just don't think that this is a helpful way to think about it.

But, of course, I don't think that what I am proposing is the right paradigm, for example, for the Global South. There you still probably need to be building factories and have people working there, you need to industrialize, you need to build your own base, you need to recreate some of the capacity domestically, instead of relying on global supply chains. So the Global South will probably be fine with the older socialist programme. I understand the geopolitical and regional bias of what I'm saying, but I don't think that the fact that there are people who are poor or homeless or who have troubles which could be immediately resolved, should take pressure off us to find holes in legitimization strategies of neoliberals, or contribute to articulating an alternative political project. Because the fact that people are hungry right now, stripped of the ideological context, tells you absolutely nothing – you might as

well believe that Elon Musk should give them basic income, or some philanthropist should fund something for them. Right? So to me, the presence of problems in the world, that are as such easily fixable, is no reason not to engage with these other questions. I think we both agree on this, but I just wanted to reiterate on it, because one is not the reason not to think about the other.

Jan Groos:

Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. Maybe it's that I think about the ability to bring about the new in different ways. Since it's an intrinsic feature I don't see it as that much of a challenge. But I think I get the point you're making. At least I think I get the point you're making in terms of providing ...

Evgeny Morozov:

... but that was the project for Marx, though. What is Marxism? Marxism is very simple. You have social relations of production that eventually block forces of production from advancing further. It's just a philosophy of the new. There is nothing else in Marx. That's the core idea, that you need to change relations of production so that the forces of production can continue unimpeded. And you can, of course, make all sorts of cases for ecology and whatever, and they're all important points, but ultimately, that's what it is. So the question of the new and its sustained, almost industrial, methodological, theoretical production, it's at the core of the leftist project.

Jan Groos:

Yes, but there are a lot of questions that are connected to that. For example, if we need to think about progressivism in a different way. I'm just not sure if we should simply jump into this competition with the neoliberals and accept their premise of markets as the harbingers of the production of the new in the first place ...

Evgeny Morozov:

... that's where we disagree, I think, because for me it's just undeniable. I also think it's undeniable phenomenologically for the majority of the population. I mean, you just need to open an app store. I mean, don't you

see all the apps? How can you possibly deny that that's the production of the new? I mean, that's what people think ...

Jan Groos:

... well, there is a strong argument to make that capitalism is limited in a certain sense to the production of the ever old in new forms. That's an argument that is out there and it has some form of plausibility to it. The way in which markets and capitalism are able to produce the news is a very, very narrow corridor in which we have this accelerated perpetuation of the old, actually, and not really the production of the new. But maybe that's what you're stating as well and we are not apart in this ...

Evgeny Morozov:

... no, no, I believe in productivity improvements. I believe that there are productivity improvements in capitalist firms that are real. They're not fake or inventions. There is no reason for capitalist firms to fake the production of productivity improvements because, if they did, they would just be eaten alive. In that sense, I do believe in competition. But that's why I mentioned that it's also important to talk about new ways of thinking about progress, because it's not only about productivity improvements when talking about the new. This way of thinking, this logic and narrow framing of the new has brought us into a place where we are aiming for catastrophe ...

Jan Groos:

Evgeny Morozov:

... but that's a different argument from saying that they're repackaging the old. I just don't think they're repackaging the old, because if they're repackaging the old, they'll just be out of business as individual capitalists. And in that sense, I think if you read somebody like Anwar Shaikh (2016), his view on competition is the same as mine and is the same to some extent as Hayek's. So competition is real and it does produce new things, both on the consumption side and on the production side. You can make all sorts of arguments based on that, of course. That's partly what I'm saying, that there are other ways in which the new

is generated, because there are other ways in which we coordinate. And so far, we've put all of our resources, all of our thinking and money and laws into boosting markets as the only infrastructure for doing that. But clearly, that's not the only infrastructure. We need alternatives for all sorts of reasons that, I accept your argument there, have to do with redefining progress and so forth. But to me, to deny that there is something new being produced in the market by both producers and consumers, and that therefore part of the neoliberal argument is correct, is counterproductive I think, because it just rejects our phenomenological everyday experience. And I see no problem in accepting that part of the neoliberal story.

Jan Groos:

Well, yes, if you state it this way, then I wouldn't say that there is nothing new being produced. But that actually brings us to a question that I wanted to ask before, but didn't. Maybe you could specify what you mean by 'the new'? Is it just productivity gains? So, if you talk about that which has to be replaced when it comes to this question of the production of 'the new', what is 'the new'? How do you define it?

Evgeny Morozov:

Does it need to be defined?

Jan Groos:

... well, it makes a big difference, if ...

Evgeny Morozov:

... I mean, if you look at it in terms of practices, these are practices and ways of being and ways of existing that were not there before when you started. We just need to introduce a temporal element in this and you're going to see practices and ways of doing things that were not there before, ways of doing old things in new ways or ways of doing completely new things.

Jan Groos:

But if you define it in this way, then 'the new' is being produced in many different social fields all the time. Why then act as if the market was this magic tool when it comes to producing the new?

Evgeny Morozov:

But who's denying that, Jan? You are telling me things that are at the core of my argument and

Jan Groos:

I'm trying to build an infrastructure for scaling them up and generating value out of them.

[laughs] Yeah, I know, I know, I know. I think it's just that ... I think why we land at this position is that I'm not sure if the thing that market competition is able to provide when it comes to building 'the new' is as huge as you put it. I think it should be problematized much more than maybe you would do. But it seems we're circling around in different ways ...

Evgeny Morozov:

Yeah, but it also depends. I mean, it depends on what your project is. It depends on how you think about neoliberalism. I don't think about this as an economic theory. I think about it as a theory of modernity and a theory of civilization, essentially. A theory of civilization that tells you precisely how to incorporate the new into your life and into the world. If you read Hayek, it's just there stated very clearly. He tells you there are all sorts of effects if you install the cash nexus where you previously had social relations or family ties, but in the long run the pie expands and the pie expands even if certain people end up as losers. And it expands precisely because this new stuff is being produced and is being produced in a sustainable way as far as capitalism is concerned. And this is what market civilization does. It's not about coordinated firms and consumers. It's about bringing novelty into the world. And if you look at the legitimization of neoliberalism, that's the reason why it's of any appeal, unless it's imposed by force. That is the most exciting part of neoliberalism, which is so exciting that social democrats are buying into it. And if you really want to dethrone it, you need to have an alternative account of how society can move forward and structurally, infrastructurally produce the new in a way that scales up. And that's not just about arts and crafts and artisanal people building things, but that there are actually ways to interconnect people in, I don't know, Ecuador with people in Moldova, which

is what the market does and you'll have to make sure the changes in the practice in one place are reflected in the life and in the practice of the other place as well.

Ultimately, what I'm saying is that we can have infrastructures that allow people to coordinate, collaborate, produce things, whether these things are effects or emotions or ideas or things that have all of the markings of what neoliberals attribute to market civilization, but without most of the costs. Currently they are not developed, because public policy is such that it doesn't channel resources into the development of these infrastructures. You cannot scale them up properly. Currently your only option is to orient yourself towards the market. And that's why we have all these idealistic people who, beyond protesting, if they really want to do something, what do they do? They form a startup in most cases, and they seek money and they know that this will allow them to scale. If they don't want to be just local operators and if they want to scale, that's what they need to do. Why? Because our entire civilization favours the market as the default and only infrastructure of scaling up this coordination and generating value out of it. But what I'm saying is that you can have a multiplicity of them. That's why in one of my earlier articles in *New Left Review* (Morozov, 2019), I basically said that Hayek has a flawed evolutionary theory and what he says about how people become less altruistic as they move from villages to cities is wrong. Evolutionary theory actually teaches us otherwise and you might as well say that solidarity will be as productive as what Hayek calls discovery, as productive as competition. There is no reason to believe that he's correct on that point and I don't think he is. But it doesn't mean that solidarity is the only thing that can do it. You can maybe list 10 values that will do it. Maybe you can list 20 and maybe you can list infrastructures that will go along with them to

enable them and to elicit these behaviours and to elicit these orientations. To me, that seems like the core question of how do you organize modernity. It's not about making sure we have a different system for building apps. It's a way for me to think about how you move society forward and embrace the new in a structured way that bypasses the dichotomy of the market and the state and refuses the idea that the only way to do it in a scaled up way is by relying on the market.

Jan Groos:

I absolutely agree. I think it's maybe ... maybe you are holding something back that is in the book, because there's something missing. I absolutely agree with everything you just said. But, for example, within capitalism, you do have private property as a form of guiding lens that is able to unify these actions much, as the market as competition does. So you will have a mechanism that is able to provide a form of pre-coordination. And in the way that you describe the alternative, of course, it's right to point out that there needs to be a multiplicity of different approaches that look at different aspects of, for example, the market, but also of different regional contexts, and so on. But then, still, you would have to come up with a mechanism that provides this glue, this form of directionality that is provided in capitalism through private property and markets as competition. You would have to find a different form of mechanism for the production of pre-configuration, so to speak, for the alternative.

Evgeny Morozov:

I don't think so. I don't think it's my problem. Because in that sense I depart from describing what so far we have been talking about for the last 10 minutes as a socialism. What I'm describing is a non-capitalism at best. It's not post-capitalism, it's a non-capitalism. And if you want to go really far, you can say that it's possible to have a multiplicity of non-capitalisms. And I don't think that it requires any grounding, for example, in an alternative property regime.

You might argue that it would require certain rights to preserve those forms of life. You might argue that you would need a right to ignorance of something, for example, because that would be the only way to preserve certain core features. We might argue that you would need some kind of institutional slack so that you don't over-optimize. But to generalize it into a theory or a guiding lens would be to convert it into an -ism, which is not what I'm trying to do. So, at best, my -ism is a non-ism and it's a non-capitalism.

Jan Groos:

Evgeny, thank you so much for being part of *Future Histories*.

Evgeny Morozov:

Sure, my pleasure.

Notes

¹ Find the extended audio version of the conversation here: <https://www.futurehistories.today/episoden-blog/s02/e44-evgeny-morozov-on-discovery-beyond-competition/>

² See for example: <https://the-santiago-boys.com/>

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