

# A worker's critique of parecon - Steven Johns



Criticism of the idea of participatory economics, or parecon, from the perspective of a worker. Despite its theoreticians' grand plans, we resist work now and we would continue to do so under parecon, Steven argues. Michael Albert subsequently responds.

## Introduction

I have read a lot of discussions about parecon - a proposed economic model for a non-capitalist society. I have even taken part in one [detailed debate here](#).

There is a lot of theoretical discussion about the nature of class, complimentary holism, some stuff about the Russian revolution, planning and so on. But I have never seen anything written about it from the point from the actual perspective of workers. And as members of the working class ourselves this should be the most important perspective from which we analyse things, so that's what I plan to do.

I have been meaning to write this article for a while and [this recent discussion in our forums](#) reminded me to actually get round to it.

## Fair wages?

The four main planks of parecon are:<sup>1</sup>

1. Workers and consumers self managed councils
2. Balanced job complexes
3. Remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor
4. Participatory planning

The most problematic of these, to communists or anarchists at least, is point 3: often summarised as "reward for effort and sacrifice". It is controversial because the central plank of the communist programme has long been the abolition of wage labour.<sup>2</sup>

So parecon does away with this, and instead of abolishing wage labour proposes a "fair" way of allocating wages. I totally disagree with this on political and logical grounds, and so this is the area I will examine.

This point has been argued on a theoretical level many times already, including in the debate I linked to above. So instead of criticising it on a political basis I will instead look at what that would mean from the perspective of workers in a parecon society. I will base my statements on how we respond to work as workers in the real world now.

So, what does rewarding effort and sacrifice mean? Basically "that if a person works longer or harder, or if a person undertakes tasks that are generally considered to be less desirable then they should be entitled to more reward."<sup>3</sup>

This raises a major problem, which pareconites seem to just brush over. Namely, this is how is effort and sacrifice measured?

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<sup>1</sup> According to [Parecon Today by Michael Albert](#), the leading proponent of parecon.

<sup>2</sup> Two major examples of this being the [revolutionary union Industrial Workers of the World](#) preamble which demands "the abolition of the wage system", and [Karl Marx in Value, prices and profit](#) stating: "take off your banners the reactionary slogan a fair days pay for a fair days work and instead inscribe upon your banner the revolutionary watchword; the abolition of the wages system".

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<sup>3</sup> [The project for a participatory society's vision](#) .

This may seem like a minor point, however it is absolutely essential for the functioning of the system.

Parecon advocates attempt to address this by peer-effort ratings, everyone filling out a form of some kind on their workmates, rating how much effort people have put in despite their natural talents or disabilities.

However, this is an idea which has been devised from above, much like some kind of anti-capitalist management consultants. Their impact on the ground for workers, and workers' responses do not seem to have been considered.

Now if we look at [capitalist society](#) as it is, we see there is a central contradiction: employers want workers to carry out as much work as possible, for as little reward as possible. Workers on the other hand want to do as little as possible, for as much as possible. It is from this basic [contradiction that class struggle](#) arises.

If a new economic system retains wages, there will still be this fundamental contradiction. In the [USSR](#), for example, instead of a mix of private and state employers in most countries, there was just one employer, the state. However the contradiction was the same.

So, what would I do if I was a worker under parecon? It would still be in my interests to perform as little work as possible and get as much money as possible. Although the way to get more would be to appear to be putting in more effort, and sacrificing more.

So some ways I would do this would be the way I and other workers do this now, and some of them would have to be altered to the new conditions.

## Collective resistance

As for the peer rating of effort: even in my current workplace, which doesn't have a particularly high level of workers' solidarity, if management introduced such a scheme we would just get together and decide collectively to all rate each other as highly as possible. That way we would all gain.

And as for sacrifice, we could also collectively decide to do a minimal number of hours each day, and yet rate each other as having worked ten-hour days. (At several previous jobs colleagues and I have covered for each other by punching in for each other alternately, as I've [written about here](#).)

Alternatively, if instead of peer rating there was some external assessor (which would seem to contradict the supposed egalitarianism of parecon), we would just put on a show whenever the assessor was there, as workers do currently when a foreman is about.<sup>4</sup>

Bear in mind that this is what occurs in workplaces in the UK today, where workers' solidarity has been broken up significantly. Parecon can only exist in a world where there has been a proletarian revolution, where workers have fought together on barricades and some will have died for each other. Especially under those sort of circumstances it would be unthinkable for people to go back to work and start spying and grassing on each other about people not pulling their weight or getting in late. Even now despite competitive workplaces and the risk of sacking (which presumably won't exist under parecon) workers often cover for each other and grasses are ostracised.

Additionally, if effort and sacrifice is what is rewarded, then if your team comes up with some new equipment or new processes which make the work easier, then you would have to do keep them secret, in order not to have your pay reduced. And of course this would be highly detrimental to society as a whole - as a rational economy would be based on trying to minimise the amount of work and effort which would have to be done.

## Individual resistance

Apart from those sort of collective measures, other workers and I would also engage in individual ways of increasing our earnings and decreasing our workload.

Now, effort and sacrifice couldn't just be applied universally, as people have different abilities. Women who are pregnant, workers who might be smaller or weaker than others, people who have disabilities, or who are temporarily ill or injured might have to do putting more effort and time to have the same kind of output as other workers.

Not to mention that people have completely different sets of abilities anyway. Some may be quicker with numbers than others, for example, others may have quicker hands.

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<sup>4</sup> The picture, above, is a tongue-in-cheek clip from 1960s Italian film *The working class goes to heaven*, with Michael Albert's face crudely cut and pasted onto the body of the piece rate monitor.

And aside from abilities, people have different preferences. For some working in an office all day would be unbearable, however for others manual labour would be much more onerous.

So if individuals' effort has to be assessed, it would have to be done so on the basis of their pre-existing abilities and preferences. Therefore I would just lie about mine. I would just say I had depression or whatever so even turning up for work in the first place would be a huge effort on my part, let alone actually doing anything when I'm there. And writing stuff up? I'm not very good at that, I'm dyslexic. And lifting? I'm very weak, and I have a bad back. Working long hours? I get migraines. Working indoors? I'm claustrophobic. Working outdoors? You guessed it, agoraphobic...

And of course this wouldn't just be me, these practices would be widespread. Far more widespread even than they are today, because under parecon there would not be the same sanctions as there are today, principally unemployment (or jail in the case of the more state capitalist economies like North Korea).

If anyone thinks I am over estimating this they would do well to read these accounts of how [widespread shirking effectively destroyed East Germany](#) and [wore down the Soviet Union](#).

## Conclusion

I believe the problems of parecon are shared by many politicians who have grand visions about the future who, like sci-fi nerds, like to imagine what a different world could look like.



### *2012 parecon convention*

But like many politicians their mistake is rooted in their ideas being based on how better to manage capital. As communists we do not believe that capital can be managed in the interests of workers.<sup>5</sup> Therefore our politics and our future vision of the world have to be based always in our everyday life and our experience **as workers**.

For if a revolution doesn't abolish "[work](#)" as a distinct activity separate from the rest of life, then workers will always fight against it.<sup>6</sup>

And that being the case the only way to enforce effective labour discipline would be to recreate capitalism with its reserve army of unemployed workers and the threat of unemployment and destitution.

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<sup>5</sup> I believe that reading the excellent Aufheben series [What was USSR?](#) is also essential reading, and has important parallels with Parecon in this respect.

<sup>6</sup> I won't go into detail about what this means as I think it is explained better in other detailed articles, like [this one by the Anarchist Federation](#). But as evidence that it is not an unachievable pipe dream I will quickly point out that many pre-capitalist societies did not have a word for "work", or in some which did it was the same word as "play". And just about every type of "work" currently done under capitalism, is also done by workers as leisure. For example, cleaning, caring for children, caring for the sick, playing music, making films, growing food, etc.

So in short if we want something workable our choice is one of full communism, or none at all.

# Albert replies to Libcom criticisms

A response by Michael Albert to [A workers' critique of parecon](#)

Recently an essay criticizing participatory economics was brought to my attention, via IOPS. "A workers' critique of parecon" appears on the site libcom, at <http://libcom.org/blog/workers-critique-parecon-11042012> I quote the piece extensively as I reply.

I should perhaps also note my motivation. While there is nothing in the essay that I and others haven't addressed often before, still, I wanted to respect the effort by addressing the author's comments directly. More, the concerns in the essay keep coming up, seemingly without reaction to each round of replies - so I can only reply yet again. Hopefully someone will put this essay on the libcom site, as well as its appearing here.

The author, Steven Johns is mostly concerned about parecon's remunerative norm - which, as he rightly notes, is that we should, in a good society, receive income in accord with how long we work, how hard we work, and the onerousness of the conditions under which we work, as long as we are doing socially valued labor.

Johns prefers, though it is never made very explicit, much less seriously explored in his piece, that we instead work to our ability, and receive to our need, leaving society no need to have remunerative norms other than personal preferences. My most recent round of addressing views like these - which were put forth considerably more extensively than here - can be found in another article: "Querying Young Chomsky," at <http://www.zcommunications.org/querying-young-chomsky-by-michael-albert> If concerns over parecon's remunerative norms and methods concern you, that might be a good additional "exchange" to view for further exploration, as the young Chomsky was a very strong advocate of the "from each, to each" position.

However, for here, as Johns accurately summarizes: "The four main planks of parecon are: Workers and consumers self managed councils, Balanced job complexes, Remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor, and Participatory planning."

Johns adds that he finds the third of these "planks" - remunerating duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor - "most problematic," "because the central plank of the communist programme has long been the abolition of wage labour." I hope readers are already a bit alarmed at the

formulation that a claim is "most problematic" because it conflicts with another claim that the critic takes as "central." Johns, however, usefully explains further: "parecon ... instead of abolishing wage labour proposes a "fair" way of allocating wages."

Whether parecon is wise to do this, we address below. Interestingly, Johns puts the word "fair" in quotes, but never in the essay addresses whether the parecon norm strikes him as anything other than "fair," equitable, etc. That isn't the issue for Johns. The issue for him is instead his concern that having any way of allocating income at all, other than individual's personal preferences deciding how much they work, and what they get, is problematic.

First, Johns is saying, as best I can tell, that to have a fair - and I prefer the word equitable - way of allocating income is already, transparently (he offers no argument, only the statement) to preserve "wage labor." This may be horribly confused depending on Johns precise meaning.

Wage labor, sometimes called wage slavery, is a term most often meant to cover the employment and payment of workers by owners via a system of workers selling their ability to do work for some period of time to owners who in turn extract as much actual work as they can coerce from the workers' time they have bought control over, all for maximizing owners' profits. Okay, Johns says he rejects that. Well, parecon advocates too say, we reject that. Are parecon advocates missing something that means that, no, they really are trying to preserve "wage labor," meant this way? That seems to me to perhaps be what Johns is implying, and certainly something that others have at times asserted.

In fact, however, having a way of allocating income, and thus a guiding norm for income allocation, and a means of accomplishing that norm, whether implicit or explicit, is simply unavoidable. It will exist in every society and every economy that will ever exist because in all such societies people will get a share of the social output. Of course the norms and structures for arriving at how much claim on social product different people have, can be fair, worthy, and viable, or the norms and structures can be skewed to benefit some at the expense of others, or they can even be completely unworkable.

Parecon believes its norm and methods offer a fair, worthy, viable option. Johns' mistake, assuming he believes that parecon's norm means it is preserving "wage labor" as this term is used by critics of capitalism, is to think that the mere fact that people get income - wages - means the system has wage labor, or wage slavery, as it exists under capitalism, or even just waged labor that is exploitative and alienating, as in any class divided system.

In this Johns goes beyond merely being wrong. It is quite like if someone argued that if we have production, then we have capitalism. Or if we have decision making, then we have authoritarianism. Or if we have procreation, then we have sexism. This way of arguing is depressingly widespread, but it mistakes something that we must have but which can be done either equitably or not - in our case, income allocation - for something that is both inessential and also vile, in this case owners employing what are called wage laborers or wage slaves.

The only reply I can imagine from Johns that would reveal that he does not have this particular confusion would be for him to say, wait, I don't mean parecon preserves wage slavery. Nor do I mean parecon preserves wage labor meaning capitalist labor. Nor do I even mean it preserves wage labor meaning exploitative or alienated labor - all simply because it has an allocative norm and methods for income determination. That would be silly. I just mean that parecon preserves workers getting income that is related to their work, and that is what I reject.

Well, okay, if that is what Johns means, then he is right that parecon does include that. And he would also be right if he said that it is instead possible to propose that people to get income for reasons having literally no connection to what they do in the economy, for example, they could get what they need and provide in accord with their ability. For example, the "Querying Young Chomsky" essay responds to the young Chomsky arguing just that, and a full reply to his formulation is rendered.) But a desire to disconnect income from economic activity, if it is Johns' view, isn't viable, nor I think, is it even equitable. Nor is it argued consistently, by Johns, at any rate.

Johns says he wants to look at the allocation norm from the "perspective of workers in a parecon society." Okay, that is exactly how its authors approached developing parecon. Workers options, interests, motives, conditions, etc., were always highlighted. Johns then adds, however, that he "will base [his] statements on how [he and others] respond to work as workers in the real world now." This is worrisome, to put it mildly, depending on Johns' precise meaning.

For example, to examine "workers in the real world now," as compared to examine the "perspective of workers in a parecon society" seems quite compatible, regrettably, with the confusion I mentioned above. It suggests that we can look at how wage laborers under capitalism act, and we can then predict by transferring the behavior, how workers under parecon would act, because we take as a given that workers under parecon are wage laborers quite like those under capitalism. But of course this is not actually making a case at all about parecon but is instead, making a case about wage labor as

we know it now, and simply stating it applies, as well, to parecon. In other words, if this is what Johns does, it is simply continuing a horribly flawed assertion that if a system has income based on some aspect of what we do in the economy, then that system has workers with interests, motives, and behaviors like those of workers operating in capitalism. Is this what Johns does? We will see below. But to prepare, because it is quite important to understand this way of arguing in general since it appears so often in discussions of future possibilities, let's say a bit more about the approach *per se*.

Suppose someone said they were going to look at the merits of a proposal for real and full democracy and evaluate it by looking at how people operate in dictatorships or even in contemporary contexts like the U.S., say, and by assuming they will act the same in the new system. Or suppose someone said they were going to look at a feminist proposal for arrangements between men, women, adults, and children, and evaluate it by how men respond to women, or even how women relate to men, *pr* adults and children, in the current patriarchal world, including assuming the behavior would persist unchanged. There is nothing necessarily wrong with paying attention to how people act now, unless, of course, this means that one is going to assume that contemporary behavior will persist even in changed institutional settings. It is hard to imagine a libertarian communist thinking such a thing, or evaluating in such a way - given that it would obliterate prospects for any positive claims and hopes at all.

Johns asks, "so, what does rewarding effort and sacrifice mean?" And he quotes parecon literature, "that if a person works longer or harder, or if a person undertakes tasks that are generally considered to be less desirable than they should be entitled to more reward." Indeed, supposing the work is socially valued, that is indeed what the norm means.

Johns continues, "This raises a major problem, which pareconites seem to just brush over. Namely, how is effort and sacrifice measured?"

Okay, this is fair enough to evaluate, of course, and if an evaluation looks closely at the morality and institutional structures and their implications for workers conditions and actions, it would step away from the more abstract tout court rejection mentioned above - but I don't understand why Johns says advocates of parecon "brush over" this. It is dealt with, explicitly, in every long presentation, and in many short ones too.

Briefly, duration is, time spent. There is nothing complex about measuring that. Intensity is most easily viewed/measured by workmates, again by looking, working with, etc., but output can certainly also be used as an

indicator. Is Joe working like the rest of us, or is Joe taking extra long and frequent breaks and otherwise not exerting? Is Sally, working much harder. with agreement from people that it is okay to do so, taking up more than an average share of responsibility for output?

Whether the effort anyone puts in is socially valuable depends on it being in pursuit of outputs that are sought by society, on the one hand, and whether it is using assets effectively, on the other hand. I can't dig holes in my yard, even incredibly energetically, and even hour after hour, and even while someone is throwing stones at me making it very onerous, and claim any income for it. much less high income. No one wants the product, a hole in the ground. I also can't do some job where my abilities for the work are so limited that my doing it is a misuse of the resources, equipment, etc. - so that the time spent is not socially valued, again, but simply wasteful.

Onerousness, finally, is measured by workmates assessing job roles, again - but is actually not very important in a parecon, as compared to in capitalist economy, because a parecon also has what are called balanced job complexes, which means workers have comparably empowering overall situations, which tends to pretty much equalize onerousness, as well. But the bottom line is, who measures these things, who decides issues, who agendizes and acts regarding the workplace, is always the same, in a parecon - the workers self managing that workplace.

Johns says, "Parecon advocates attempt to address this by peer-effort ratings, everyone filling out a form of some kind on their workmates, rating how much effort people have put in despite their natural talents or disabilities."

Well, yes, parecon advocates offer this is one tortured possibility, in some presentations. In real life, however, we point out that there are many possibilities, including, as noted above, that we can see output, and if one claims to be working long and hard, but is generating very little, either the person is doing work they shouldn't be doing (because they are unable to do it well enough for their effort to be socially valuable) or they are lying or delusional about duration or intensity. Actually, though, the point of the "effort ratings" is that duration and intensity are actually quite easy to simply see, for the most part. A manager of huge numbers of folks can be pretty easily fooled, and workers being bossed around will reasonably want to do so. Workmates cannot be easily fooled, however, and in a parecon, in any case, overwhelmingly workers will not want to fool their workmates, in any case.

As but one example, suppose 100 of us work in a plant. It is part of parecon, has targets for production that fit the self managed participatory plan. We are all workers, there is no boss. Suppose the plan produces the output target as

envisioned. The plant is then entitled to 100 times the average income in society. Now how is the income allotted among workers inside the plant? Well, if the plant workforce agreed to requests from 10 workers to work half time, say, and to some other workers to work double hard, or double time, or whatever - all to arrive at the planned output, then incomes would vary due to those differences. If not, incomes would be average for all. If you are convinced workers in a self managing plant would be trying to rip off one another, you might well feel that it could get pretty chaotic. But if not, then not. If the workers wanted to rip off the rest of society, they could all together claim to have worked way more than they did - or harder, which amounts to the same thing. The trouble is, in that case, why wasn't output higher? There is no extra income to disperse if the work did not generate socially valuable output.

Then Johns says, "however, this is an idea which has been devised from above, much like some kind of anti-capitalist management consultants. Their impact on the ground for workers, and workers' responses do not seem to have been considered."

This seems really odd to me. Parecon is the product of "anti capitalist management consultants"? It would be awfully hard to explain, in that case, how it is that parecon is arguably the only serious economic model out there that emphasizes eliminating the class division between managers - and other coordinator class members monopolizing empowering work - and workers who are left with only subordinate and disempowering work. Without going astray, this is what balanced job complexes, another aspect of parecon, are all about. It is hard to think of an economic proposal that anyone could offer that would be more contrary to "management consultant" mindset.

Is the impact on workers of this remunerative norm, in in the parecon institutional context, considered. Of course it is - that is the point. The impact is workers do not compete with one another, they have mutually shared interests, they get equitable conditions and claims on social output, they exist without having to repress or resist others with different interests, and so on.

When Johns says "workers responses don't seem to be considered," I suspect we are back to the basic confusion. In full descriptions of parecon, and in discussions and debates about it, talks, debates, presentations, videos, the responses of workers within parecon are not only considered, they are central. Indeed, in talks one technique is to have whole audiences imagine they are a workplace, and to then explore their inclinations and motives with different institutional choices. The whole point of parecon is conceiving institutions that give to parecon's workers roles and responsibilities that not only facilitate their solidarity with one another and self management, their equity and diversity, but that by their implications for workers interests and actions literally further

these values. That is the heart of parecon. So why does Johns say workers responses are not considered? The only answer I can think of, is, (a) he hasn't actually looked at serious presentations of parecon, or (b) he assumes and believes it utterly obvious that workers in parecon will behave like workers do in capitalism so since parecon's advocates don't say that, we must not have looked at all.

Johns then says, "Now if we look at capitalist society as it is, we see there is a central contradiction: employers want workers to carry out as much work as possible, for as little reward as possible. Workers on the other hand want to do as little as possible, for as much as possible. It is from this basic contradiction that class struggle arises."

It is from this basic contradiction that many aspects of class struggle in capitalism, arise, yes.

Johns adds, "If a new economic system retains wages, there will still be this fundamental contradiction."

This, I hope by this time you will agree, is mere assertion, not argument, and is also seriously wrong.

By wages in this sentence what Johns has to mean is claims on social output. That is the real meaning of wages, per se. If I have more wages, I have more claim. If I have less wages, I have less claim. Now what norms are utilized to determine how much claim we each have is very very important, of course. If the norms pit one class against another, so that one does better if the other does worse, then, yes, there is an important contradiction which will affect "workers' responses." Of course. But what if that is not the case? What if there are no opposed classes, because there is classlessness? Then Johns having more claim on social output for reasons everyone agrees are just and fair, and I having less claim on social output also for reasons that we all agree are just and fair, does not have to mean there is a fundamental contradiction. We have to look to see. Is Johns getting more at my expense? Or at anyone's expense? Or is Johns getting his claims by the same standard that I am, a standard that we both agree is completely just. Well, parecon argues that if Johns has more claim because he agrees to work longer, or harder, or at worse conditions, and his workmates agree on the option, and if the product is socially beneficial, then that is just. And parecon argues if I get less income because I opt for more leisure, or more leisurely work, that too is just.

Johns says, "in the USSR, for example, instead of a mix of private and state employers in most countries, there was just one employer, the state. However the contradiction was the same."

This is quite simplistic but even if it were the whole story for these countries, it still wouldn't have the implication that Johns gives it. He is trying to say, look, here is a case of workers getting wages, and we know there was a class conflict as well, and - now the leap - the former must be the cause of the latter. Of course the state isn't an individual in the old USSR, any more than in the U.S. Regarding economics, it was instead a political vehicle that, regarding the economy, was overwhelmingly serving ruling class interests. In the U.S. that is a state serving capitalists. In the USSR, that was a state serving what I call the coordinator class - economic actors who had a monopoly on empowering work. Notice, also, that the norm in the USSR was to remunerate power, and the class division guaranteed the coordinator class had way more power than the working class. But the point is, you can't extrapolate workers' behaviors from a condition of class rule to a condition of classlessness.

Trying to give some credibility to the transfer of motives, Johns says, "So, what would I do if I was a worker under parecon?" This is fair enough to ask. But in Johns answer, the confusion, or obfuscation - and I will assume the former but I also have to admit I am beginning to wonder if it isn't the latter - is truly remarkable.

Johns talks very briefly about two grotesque systems - capitalism and coordinatorism - which parecon's advocates all reject and which parecon deals with at length as what is to be transcended, and he then asks, what would a worker do under parecon, clearly thinking his examples of workers resisting class rule in the U.S. and USSR also imply people's likely behavior in the absence of classes. Johns says, "it would still be in my interests to perform as little work as possible and get as much money as possible. Although the way to get more would be to appear to be putting in more effort, and sacrificing more."

There is an element of truth here. It is true, for example, that in a parecon, a cheat, who in a context of mutual aid and solidarity, and of equitable distribution, nonetheless wants more than the system would legitimately provide him or her, would have, as a route to getting the extra he or she desires, three paths. The person could work longer or harder. The person could steal the extra. Or the person could try to lie about putting in more time, or intensity, or working at worse conditions - than was the case.

What assuming the last will happen utterly ignores, however, is precisely to look at the situation of workers in parecon - not in class divided prior economies, and at the interests and preferences their situation generates. When self managing their own labor, when in just conditions, when having no ruling class above, about as few people will be inclined to try to rip off society much less their workmates as are now inclined to steal ice cream cones from

children. Only the somewhat or seriously pathological would see this as a good path to extra income. Okay, I quite agree that its requiring a quite perverse personality doesn't rule out everyone from trying. But Johns also ignores just how hard it would be to cheat. Could you lie, successfully, to the person who works with you, about how long your worked, or how intensely - remembering that of course not only are your actions directly visible, but also your product? And more, even if you could convince people that you worked 60 hours a week, instead of the average of thirty, let's say - when you really didn't - if your labor generated only the thirty hours of output then you are either lying, or you are, in the job you are working at, only fifty percent as productive as the average - and you would need to get new work you could do more effectively because your work was so flawed half the time you spent doing it was not socially valuable. Maybe you can convince everyone that you lack size or speed, or whatever, due to some ailment - and maybe you can somehow get them to think you are at work the sixty hours when you really are not - and so on - and get them to okay your working so long. I hope you see how silly this gets. Even so, the gains would be incredibly modest, given what a jerk you have to be, not to mention how much you would risk being considered one, and then losing your gains, too.

Johns idea that individuals would be inclined to even try to cheat, in large numbers, in equitable, collectively self managed, classless settings, is horribly reactionary, honestly, regarding human dispositions. But, even if we set that aside, it is virtually impossible to pull off such fraud in anything more than very modest degree. In fact, even my other option for enriching myself unjustly, is very very hard to benefit from. Suppose I am a master thief - and I somehow steal lots of wealth. It would have to be objects, not money, at least in a developed parecon - because money isn't free floating - but whatever it was, where would I enjoy the fruits of my thefts? Legitimate income differentials in a parecon are due to working longer, harder, or at worse conditions in ways that generate socially valued outputs, consistent with one's workmates agendas, as well. It would be quite hard, over an extended period, to earn even twice the average income. Five times would be utterly impossible. A master thief would have to enjoy the great bounty of his or her scrupulous skills in his or her own basement, because in public such wealth would be a dead give away that one was, in fact, a master thief or cheat. My comments, here, by the way, and throughout this essay, have been made in more depth and with very graphic examples, and including dealing with more interesting variants, like, say, black market production, many many times. One wonders why a serious critic would ignore all that, acting as though the parecon proposals have no accompanying exploration of such issues.

Johns moves on to another possibility. He says, "even in my current workplace, which doesn't have a particularly high level of workers' solidarity, if management introduced such a scheme we would just get together and

decide collectively to all rate each other as highly as possible. That way we would all gain."

Well, the confusion mentioned earlier is now absolutely in evidence. First, I would join them, if I worked there. But second, in a parecon, there is no separate management, nor owners, nor anyone else above the workforce. I would not only not join some anti social workmate who was trying to perpetrate fraud, I would try to break through the backward thinking of such a person, and, if I couldn't do that, well, I would argue against his or her excessive remuneration. But what if we all act together? What if the whole workforce tries to convince society we worked a whole lot more than we did, because we all together decide to conspire to get more income for the whole workforce in the plant that we can all share, even though we all agree that the amount we would get without cheating is equitable and treats us exactly like everyone else in the economy. We just want more, dammit and we are going to try to lie to get it. Well, it still would not work. Because the work that gets remunerated has to be socially desirable. If Johns and I worked in some kind of plant, and we along with all our workmates said we worked twice as hard and twice as long as average - either our plant has that much additional output - in that case four times as much - or we lied, or all that extra time and effort was worthless - not socially desirable, and not worthy of remuneration.

Johns says, revealing not only a pretty jaundiced view of working people - that parecon's workers would behave, and not just some of them, but essentially the whole workforce, as he says he would, and this even in an equitable economy, even with self management, even without class rule, etc. He says: "And as for sacrifice, we could also collectively decide to do a minimal number of hours each day, and yet rate each other as having worked ten-hour days." Even supposing whole workforces were eager to try and trick not bosses, not owners, not a domineering coordinator class, but other workers just like themselves, into giving them unfair allotments, again it just wouldn't work. The output, as noted above, denies the claim. We can't work 15 hours a week, as a group, and claim to have worked 30, because we don't have thirty hours output.

Johns says, "Parecon can only exist in a world where there has been a proletarian revolution, where workers have fought together on barricades and some will have died for each other."

In other words, parecon is contrary to the interests of elites who maintain current systems and can be won only in a likely long and certainly difficult struggle. Well, I agree, of course. As to what precisely it will take to win, and what path or paths will lead to implementing participatory economies, we just don't know, of course - but a long hard struggle, sure.

Johns adds that, "Especially under those sort of circumstances it would be unthinkable for people to go back to work and start spying and grassing on each other about people not pulling their weight or getting in late."

Seriously? After struggling for a new, equitable, self managing, classless economy, what Johns thinks is that in it, to implement equitable remuneration, means spying on one another, etc. Well, I admit that this is a point various parecon advocates do wonder about. To what extent, in a parecon, with equitable remuneration, would there be tight, or very loose accounting of duration, intensity, and onerousness, and how precisely would workers implement their arrangements? For the latter, however they choose. That is what self management means. For the former, however, I think, for example, that whatever roads lead to its implementation, in a parecon, at least after it has operated for a time, most folks will decide that fraud is a relatively small issue and the need for close attention to claims about duration and intensity is relatively slight, and even the number of levels of remuneration that ought to exist is quite low - as in, say, way over average (meaning perhaps 20% over), over average (meaning 10% over), average, under average (meaning 10% below), and way under average (meaning 20% below). Others might think the range of incomes folks should be entitled to earn should be wider and the precision of them more accurate. Different workplaces might opt for different arrangements. But the main point is, different workers, and different firms and industries, can opt, via self management, for different approaches in their own workplaces ways of measuring and allotting income for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor.

Johns quotes in his article, a part of one sentence from pareconish texts - that is it - and I have to say, I wonder how much more than that he has read. The issues that concern Johns are all addressed, literally all of them, all over the perecon literature. Maybe if he read a full discussion Johns would still have issues, fair enough, but at least his issues would then be issues with parecon itself - with its institutions and their implications - rather than with capitalism and centrally planned "socialism" transported as if they somehow apply as well to a completely different system - and at least they would move beyond an instant reaction, to real consideration.

Johns says, "Additionally, if effort and sacrifice is what is rewarded, then if your team comes up with some new equipment or new processes which make the work easier, then you would have to do keep them secret, in order not to have your pay reduced. And of course this would be highly detrimental to society as a whole - as a rational economy would be based on trying to minimize the amount of work and effort which would have to be done."

This kind of thinking pattern is totally warranted and reasonable to ask about - and of course we do, in our own presentations. What is not reasonable, I feel, is to take serious proposals, such as those for parecon, read a little bit, maybe in some description, maybe in what someone else says about it, and decide the proposals must be horrible because they are not what one has previously oneself advocated, lib com's central plank that is violated, remember, and then simply shoot away, not bothering to look at what the proposals actually have to say about the issues you are raising.

In fact, in parecon there is every interest, for every citizen, in developing technology that reduces the onerousness of labor and increases output per effort expended - other things such as environmental impact taken into account too, of course. The former, reducing onerousness of labor, improves the quality of balanced job complexes - and derivatively the quality of work, for everyone. The latter, increasing output per effort expended, either increases what every gets for an unchanged level of work in society, or reduces how much we all have to work to get the same as we are used to. And there are no adverse effects from innovations on people's incomes. Why? Because, over time, jobs alter and are balanced, innovations spreading since there are no copyrights, etc.

Could we imagine a case like Johns has in mind? In some plant some smart worker comes up with an innovation. It doesn't require investment and receipt of lots of new equipment - which would be visible in the plan. Instead, it is some very clever change, lets say, in how the work is actually done, which increases output per hour dramatically with no required purchase of new equipment. Our firm can now produce the amount the plan specified - what is socially beneficial, in half the time we could do it last year. We look around and say let's cheat. Everyone is on board. Let's tell society there has been no change, keep the insight for ourselves - so other firms in the same industry still function the old way and benefits are robbed from everyone in society.

Okay, now what? We go to work each day - let's say, for 8 hours, let's four days a week. We get done with our work, however, due to the clever change that we keep secret, each day in four hours. Whoops. If we close down the plant at noon, everyone sees, and there goes the fraud. If we all go home, same thing. So we literally have to stay in the workplace, but not work - working would leave us with too much output, and the innovation would be implemented everywhere. Okay, this is just one example, and even without having the most modest oversight, and even assuming anti social motivations from an entire workforce that enjoys a social setting that produces sociality, and yet, still, it is very hard to seriously benefit. Suppose Johns is right that people would do this - and their benefit would be that they spend four hours each day in the workplace playing cards. What would it take to prevent it. How

about a job in the economy which is to research workplace effectivity...by visiting. Done. But truly, there is no point in us now trying to figure out every variant structure people in the future might opt for. Future workers will decide their own paths. There is point in our determining a set of core institutions that are workable, viable, and that would generate not anti social attitudes, like those Johns claims he would manifest, but solidarity and mutual aid; not domination and subordination, but self management; not class division and class rule, but classlessness.

Johns now goes back to individuals saying "apart from those sort of collective measures, other workers and I would also engage in individual ways of increasing our earnings and decreasing our workload." Indeed, under capitalism you might. The actual truth is, in the real world, however, there is less of this than there ought to be. I agree with Johns it not only makes sense, under capitalism, but it is morally warranted to act in ways that redistribute income from profits to wages. It doesn't happen enough, but I think for understandable reasons. Society says that to act that way is to cheat, to be fraudulent - and most people just don't want to be cheaters or frauds, even if the label is unwarranted. But in parecon, in any event, there are no profits. The social product goes entirely to the population, not disproportionately to an elite above the population. We all work average hours, at average intensity, at comparable jobs, and we all get an equal share - or we deviate from equal shares if some work longer, others less long, and so on, all happening within workplaces that are okay with it, and in ways that are socially desirable in terms of output.

Johns says - now taking up another point that is addressed over and over in pareconish presentations - that "effort and sacrifice couldn't just be applied universally, as people have different abilities. Women who are pregnant, workers who might be smaller or weaker than others, people who have disabilities, or who are temporarily ill or injured might have to do putting more effort and time to have the same kind of output as other workers."

The truth is, Johns either hasn't read, or has totally forgot what he did read, beyond the most cursory content about parecon. If I had to bet, I would bet that he read some other critic, maybe in libcom itself, but not, say the book Parecon. And this is being nice to Johns, honestly. Because if Johns did read the book, then this whole article is incredibly intellectually dishonest. Of course parecon recognizes such matters. The broad norm is, if you can't work, or can only work some, your income is average anyhow, and you medical needs are met freely, in any case, of course. Whoops. Johns might now say - oh, great, I have another way to cheat. I can make believe I am sick...

Johns adds, "Not to mention that people have completely different sets of abilities anyway. Some may be quicker with numbers than others, for example, others may have quicker hands."

And this is an observation he thinks we must have missed? Johns essay is about pareconish remuneration - my guess is that there is no presentation of pareconish remuneration that doesn't at the outset of the discussion, arrive at the norm of remunerating duration, intensity, and onerousness, precisely by taking into account these matters that he says parecon ignores. People are not remunerated for output, which is what market socialists would claim to favor, not least because the types of differences Johns points to would in that case mean people would have different output despite working the same duration and intensity. As to my liking some work conditions Johns might not like, and vice versa - that is not what parecon is talking about regarding onerousness. When we apply for jobs we all want ones that we like more, not less, given who we are. That is fine. If in a workplace there is some horrible task that pops up, then yes, it is pretty likely that the volunteers to do it will be those for whom it is personally less horrific. But parecon uses the social valuation, not the personal taste of the person doing the task as its measure. And yes, that does mean a masochist might benefit, supposing he or she wanted to take more income for something he or she enjoyed - but, of course, he or she might take less income for it, as a masochist, of course. And in a work place workers could account for such matters, or not. In the economy as a whole, it is just so minimal an issue that it isn't part of the centrally defining matters of a classless economy. What makes something onerous in the centrally defining account is its attributes - it is unsafe, say, or it is horribly boring, or whatever. If Johns like something more than I do, that's fine, he should look for such options as his work. I might think being a doctor would be horrific - onerous beyond belief and Johns might love what it involves. But those who opt to be doctors for equitable remuneration will think quite differently than me. Will parecon have perfect valuations of the onerousness of all work. No. It is a social determination. Will there be fair valuations? Yes.

Johns says, "And aside from abilities, people have different preferences. For some working in an office all day would be unbearable, however for others manual labour would be much more onerous." So? Parecon, the book, gives every example, every case, that Johns offers, and many that are richer, I think. But what I think is most important about his essay is not even whether he is right or wrong about certain points, but, honestly, that he pays very nearly zero attention to what is said within presentations of parecon. This is what I mean by he has either not read any of the longer presentations, or he has read them and has no reason to reject what is said in them bearing on his concerns and so makes believe nothing is said. After all, parecon simply must be rejected because it violates what Johns thinks is a main plank of his viewpoint, and therefore must be wrong.

Then Johns says, "So if individuals' effort has to be assessed, it would have to be done so on the basis of their pre-existing abilities and preferences. Therefore I would just lie about mine. I would just say I had depression or whatever so even turning up for work in the first place would be a huge effort on my part, let alone actually doing anything when I'm there. And writing stuff up? I'm not very good at that, I'm dyslexic. And lifting? I'm very weak, and I have a bad back. Working long hours? I get migraines. Working indoors? I'm claustrophobic. Working outdoors? You guessed it, agoraphobic..."

What Johns is saying is that in a classless situation, with self management, he and everyone will prefer to be anti social brutes, trying to rip off everyone else by fraud, and happy to make believe their capacities are less than they really are - and will also easily get away with it. Fair enough. If everyone is inclined to treat their equals the way some - not most - now treat their bosses - then parecon would have the problem Johns raises. Not intractable, but real. Parecon would then have to create a context where it was very hard to get away with such nonsense. Take his example, if Johns is going to fool me, and he works with me, and he is indeed going to fool all the others he works with too, then he will have to play the role of being permanently ill if that is his claim, or whatever else means he has less capacity than he really does have. But now notice something. When he works next to me, he has to display this diminished capacity - not greater capacity. So he has to work, for say, eight hours and have the output match the diminished capacity. He can't work for four hours, do it all, and go home. In short, he now accomplishes nothing by lying. He does not get higher income per hour than he would have by being honest. The rest of what Johns offered would actually merely mean he should not work inside, nor ever want to be inside in the vicinity of those he works with - or outside, as the case may be - and notice, again, he gains nothing by this silliness and loses a good part of his life - or, if he claims both, then he has to be suicidal, I guess, constantly bashed by his every locale. This is all quite ridiculous, honestly.

But the heart of the matter, again, is Johns sad and defeatist slight of hand - that typically is the exact opposite of the mindset of libertarian communists - which the libcom site represents, I believe. That is, the formulation that everyone will try to fuck over everyone else in a good society, merely because they get incomes - which is true in any society - even as they do in a rotten, classist, market system.

Johns says, "if anyone thinks I am over estimating this they would do well to read these accounts of how widespread shirking effectively destroyed East Germany and wore down the Soviet Union." Suppose that was true - which I think in fact it is a large exaggeration of this one factor - it is even in that case amazing to me that Johns doesn't realize, apparently, that what he is saying,

which is that as bad as things are, anywhere, is what they must be, everywhere, always. If in the Soviet Union and the U.S. workers try to finagle greater income and less work to whatever degree they can get away with, than that will be true, too, in a parecon, and, I should think, in any system - or else, why in a parecon?

And here is the incredible punchline. Suppose we take Johns at face value. We assume he really feels all this after serious assessment, and that if he hasn't paid much attention to what he is critiquing it is only because he read someone who led him to believe there was no need, because it was so transparently dumb, or something like that. Libcom, and probably Johns, thinks that what we should really favor for remuneration in a good society is that each person should work the amount they choose to, and consume as much as they wish to. This is what the young Chomsky argued, as well. But there is a big difference. The young Chomsky had an optimistic view of workers' motives and inclinations. Johns has a pessimistic one. I reject this norm of from each to each because the assumption that people will try to be and especially that they will manage to be humane, caring, and equitable in their free and completely unmediated choices neglects to notice that they have no way of knowing what choices would in fact be humane, caring, and equitable, or instead, excessive, or unduly harsh on themselves. But Johns to be consistent, has to reject his remunerative norm on different grounds. He has to reject it because he believes people are out for themselves and worried, even in a classless economy with mutually agreed norms that apply to all, as long as there are claims on social output and work to be done, that someone might get more than they, or work less than they, so they need to cheat, or they just want to. Well, in his economy, the truth is, they don't even have to cheat. All they have to do is increase what they request and diminish the amount they work, which is what Johns repeatedly says they will try to do even against social norms, much less in accord with them, however they choose. John thinks people will be self seeking without limit against shared social norms, against their workmates, against the rest of society, and risking repercussions, in a parecon. But all of a sudden, he thinks that with just this new norm, people can take as much as they want and work as little as they want, people won't behave anti socially even though there is no cost to doing so, thereby obliterating his entire prior stance in a flash.

Johns says, "I believe the problems of parecon are shared by many politicians who have grand visions about the future who, like sci-fi nerds, like to imagine what a different world could look like." Well, what can I say? Johns makes no effort to take seriously a proposal for a different way to operate an economy. He ignores almost everything written about it. He ignores answers to the very points he raises, whole chapters, for example, in the book parecon, devoted to addressing his concerns. He thinks it is okay for him to favor, instead, what is in fact a ridiculously impossible norm, from each according to ability to each

according to according to need, which not only requires that people want to be equitable and just, which when it suits him, he denies, but also that they magically know what behavior is in fact equitable and just - not to mention other difficulties, but it is not okay, indeed it is scifi nerdish, for someone to think seriously about a set of institutions - intentionally quite minimalist - which can actually establish conditions of equity, self management, classlessness, etc. I guess about all this, we can just agree to disagree.

Johns then says, "But like many politicians their mistake is rooted in their ideas being based on how better to manage capital."

What? Really? Advocates of parecon are just interested in "how better to manage capital"? Not in classlessness? Not in self management? Not in solidarity? This is a kind of scare tactic. Assert it, and the damage to what you don't like is done - it is branded soft on capital. There is no need for actual substance. In fact, parecon not only gets rid of private ownership, it gets rid of coordinator class versus working class distinctions too - there is neither capital to manage above workers, nor surpluses to manage above workers. There is, instead, the energy and talents and wisdom of working people to apply to get outputs that are desired and to share them among people in equitable ways.

Johns says, "if a revolution doesn't abolish 'work' as a distinct activity separate from the rest of life, then workers will always fight against it."

I have no idea what Johns even thinks he means by this. I would be curious to find out. Work, which is producing socially valuable outputs, is not the same as my taking a bath, washing a floor, raising a child, playing a game, dancing, and so on. If all these latter activities are distinct things we can talk about, then so is work. And work, in context of talking about an economic vision for how to handle production, consumption, and allocation in a classless way while delivering self management, solidarity, diversity, and equity, is putting one's abilities to use to generate outputs that will benefit others in society, as one expects those others to do, as well, including to one's own benefit.

Johns then adds, "And that being the case the only way to enforce effective labour discipline would be to recreate capitalism with its reserve army of unemployed workers and the threat of unemployment and destitution."

It really is incredible that Johns thinks this constitutes serious analysis. Everything but what he favors must be capitalism in disguise. Somehow it seems that Johns thinks that if we simply say everyone can have anything they say they need, and can do any amount they say they want to do - suddenly everyone will not only behave wonderfully by internal inclination, but also will know quite well what actions constitute behaving wonderfully. While I

think a great many more people than Johns believes when it suits him to dismiss parecon's equitable remuneration. would, in fact, want to behave sensibly and ethically, I also think - among other problems having to do with misallocation of resources, etc. - that with his preferred approach, no one would know what behaving wonderfully requires, not to mention society not being able to discern what directions investment should take, etc.

A far deeper and more serious discussion of Johns' concerns, and some that are related to his, appears in the essay noted at the outset, Querying Young Chomsky, but that is still only an essay. A look at a book might be more worthy of a critic.

Johns' punchline - "So in short if we want something workable our choice is one of full communism, or none at all." As above, I am also not sure what he means. If he means a good economy must have no remunerative norm - impossible - or must have his favored one - well, I guess we have to agree to disagree about that. If he means to have a classless economy we must have a classless economy - and that means we must not have institutions that generate class division and class rule - I agree.

## Steven Johns responds to Michael Albert's reply



Steven Johns of libcom.org responds to [parecon advocate Michael Albert's reply](#) to [Steven's libertarian communist critique of participatory economics](#).

I must admit this reply has taken me a while, as I didn't expect a response to my original article of only 1500 words to be so extensive (nearly 9000 words). And I've got a lot on my plate at the moment.

Not only that, but as we at libcom.org stressed in [our previous debate with a parecon advocate](#), we don't think that debating the minutiae of a post-capitalist society is a particularly useful activity for those of us who oppose capitalism today.

Nonetheless I appreciate that Albert took the time to respond in such depth. However, I was quite disappointed that his response was based almost entirely on a complete misrepresentation of my views and my initial argument.

In addition to that, there are several areas where we have significant disagreements, which I will address in the order in which he discusses them.

Johns prefers, though it is never made very explicit, much less seriously explored in his piece, that we instead work to our ability, and receive to our need, leaving society no need to have remunerative norms other than personal preferences. My most recent round of addressing views like these - which were put forth considerably more extensively than here - can be found in another article: "Querying Young Chomsky," at <http://www.zcommunications.org/querying-young-chomsky-by-michael-albert> If concerns over parecon's remunerative norms and methods concern you, that might be a good additional "exchange" to view for further exploration, as the young Chomsky was a very strong advocate of the "from each, to each" position.

In this assertion, Albert is broadly correct. I do hold, like [Chomsky outlines in this interview](#), that in a good society we will be able to contribute what we can, and receive what we need from society.

I disagree that the only "remunerative norm" will be personal preference, which is an assertion which to me comes off as a dismissive strawman. Of course personal preference will be a significant factor (as it is in capitalist society) but other factors such as availability/scarcity will also have an impact. Albert repeats this strawman multiple times through his article.

## Fairness

Johns, however, usefully explains further: "parecon ... instead of abolishing wage labour proposes a "fair" way of allocating wages."

Whether parecon is wise to do this, we address below. Interestingly, Johns puts the word "fair" in quotes, but never in the essay addresses whether the parecon norm strikes him as anything other than "fair," equitable, etc. That isn't the issue for Johns.

As I stated in my article, its intention wasn't to debate the ethics of parecon, but was to hypothesise about how workers would react in it. In our previous debate with parecon, we did discuss fairness. And if Albert is really interested, then I am happy to inform him that no I do not believe that this is "fair" (whatever "fair" means). Nor do I believe it is workable, for the reasons outlined in my previous article.

On the concept of "fairness" of wages in general: I think that [Karl Marx](#) made mistakes but something he was dead right on was his call to workers: "Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'"

On the "fairness" of remuneration for effort and sacrifice specifically, a quick personal example comes to mind. At the council where I work management for several years has been attempting to introduce performance related pay. A system which they claim will be "fairer" as it will better reward those who work harder. Now, my co-workers and I have successfully resisted its introduction so far as we believe it will be neither fair nor conducive to a productive working environment (management are now attempting to impose it once more using the crisis as an excuse, but that's another story).

I believe it is unfair as it will discriminate against the disabled, and people with different types of abilities. It will also most likely institutionally discriminate against women and workers from ethnic minorities. And it will harm the working environment as instead of cooperating we will be competing with one another to work harder and longer than each other. Which again will discriminate against disabled people and people with caring responsibilities - who are disproportionately female.

Some of these criticisms of performance related pay are equally relevant for parecon. So with parecon either it would discriminate against people with disabilities or caring responsibilities, or else it would be unworkable as people could just pretend to have disabilities (particularly invisible ones like anxiety, depression, etc) or different abilities.

## Wage work

Next comes a key area of disagreement, where Michael Albert gets into all sorts of semantic manoeuvrings to try to claim that wages under parecon are not actually wages:

Wage labor, sometimes called wage slavery, is a term most often meant to cover the employment and payment of workers by owners via a system of workers selling their ability to do work for some period of time to owners who in turn extract as much actual work as they can coerce from the workers' time they have bought control over, all for maximizing owners' profits. Okay, Johns says he rejects that. Well, parecon advocates too say, we reject that.

I referred to wages as meaning remuneration for work performed which can be exchanged for a share of the social product.

Albert's definition of wage labour here is inadequate, from a revolutionary point of view. In the former Soviet Union and other state capitalist economies, enterprises do not have "owners" in the same way as more free market economies do. Nor do "owners" make "profits" in the same way. However, the workers are still wage slaves, people compelled to work for a share of the social product, and for survival. And the subjective experience of work is very similar in both types of economies. Certainly the response of workers, which is to resist work (whether by not trying their hardest, absenteeism, covert sabotage or open strikes) is the same in both.

In fact, however, having a way of allocating income, and thus a guiding norm for income allocation, and a means of accomplishing that norm, whether implicit or explicit, is simply unavoidable. It will exist in every society and every economy that will ever exist because in all such societies people will get a share of the social output.

In the former part of this assertion, Albert is completely incorrect. Of course in all societies people will get a share of the social output. However this is not the same thing as all members of the society having a monetary income. For the majority of the time humans have existed, money and therefore income did not even exist.

Parecon believes its norm and methods offer a fair, worthy, viable option. Johns' mistake, assuming he believes that parecon's norm means it is preserving "wage labor" as this term is used by critics of capitalism, is to think that the mere fact that people get income - wages - means the system has wage labor, or wage slavery, as it exists under capitalism, or even just waged labor that is exploitative and alienating, as in any class divided system.

In this Johns goes beyond merely being wrong. It is quite like if someone argued that if we have production, then we have capitalism. Or if we have decision making, then we have authoritarianism. Or if we have procreation, then we have sexism.

Here Albert reels off a string of complete non sequiturs to counter my point which I believe is based on reality. And certainly my subjective experience as a worker.

The point I'm making is nothing to do with someone making the ridiculous argument that if there is production there is capitalism. The point I am making

is that if people are forced to work for wages in order to receive a share of the social product, then people will resist this imposition.

I believe I am backed up by empirical evidence here, as every society I'm aware of where there are wage workers -i.e. there are people working for a wage (to avoid Albert attempting any more semantic gymnastics to try to say that it won't apply to parecon) - workers have resisted work on an individual and collective basis. Whereas in moneyless societies where "work" as a separate sphere of life didn't exist, this did not occur (indeed it couldn't, as there were no workers, and there was no "work").

If Albert could point to any examples in the real world of groups of wage workers which did not resist work then of course I will take this into consideration.

The only reply I can imagine from Johns that would reveal that he does not have this particular confusion would be for him to say, wait, I don't mean parecon preserves wage slavery.

In response to this point, if you say that workers under parecon will have to work for wages, in order to get a share of the social product (and if we do not then like now we will either have to starve or scrape by like the unemployed do now on benefits) then I would say that yes from the perspective of wage workers ourselves, we will still be wage slaves.

[Johns says] I just mean that parecon preserves workers getting income that is related to their work, and that is what I reject.

Well, okay, if that is what Johns means, then he is right that parecon does include that. And he would also be right if he said that it is instead possible to propose that people to get income for reasons having literally no connection to what they do in the economy, for example, they could get what they need and provide in accord with their ability. For example, the "Querying Young Chomsky" essay responds to the young Chomsky arguing just that, and a full reply to his formulation is rendered.) But a desire to disconnect income from economic activity, if it is Johns' view, isn't viable, nor I think, is it even equitable. Nor is it argued consistently, by Johns, at any rate.

Some of this point I will get into later, although I would refer people to the interview with Chomsky linked to earlier for discussion of people receiving what they need from society.

A problem with Albert's points here is that he seems unable to break from bourgeois (i.e. capitalistic) concepts. Namely here I'm referring to his comment about disconnecting "income from economic activity". Not only am I saying that "income" should not exist, as money should be abolished, but the entire idea of "economic activity" as a distinct sphere of life separate from everything else I think is inherently capitalistic and should be done away with. As I said, I'll get into this in more detail later.

Johns says he wants to look at the allocation norm from the "perspective of workers in a parecon society." ... Johns then adds, however, that he "will base [his] statements on how [he and others] respond to work as workers in the real world now." This is worrisome, to put it mildly, depending on Johns' precise meaning.

Albert then goes on in some detail about how he disagrees with this approach. Myself, I base my ideas on practical evidence in the real world.

So in order to have some idea of how wage workers under parecon will act, I can only go on how wage workers in other societies, such as workers for private capitalists (i.e. owners as Albert describes them) or in state capitalist societies act.

If Albert has counterexamples of societies of wage workers who don't want to work as little as possible for as much money as possible, i.e. who don't have the same fundamental economic interest as workers under capitalism, then I would be very happy to learn from them.

It suggests that we can look at how wage laborers under capitalism act, and we can then predict by transferring the behavior, how workers under parecon would act, because we take as a given that workers under parecon are wage laborers quite like those under capitalism... In other words, if this is what Johns does, it is simply continuing a horribly flawed assertion that if a system has income based on some aspect of what we do in the economy, then that system has workers with interests, motives, and behaviors like those of workers operating in capitalism...

There is nothing necessarily wrong with paying attention to how people act now, unless, of course, this means that one is going to assume that contemporary behavior will persist even in changed institutional settings. It is hard to imagine a libertarian communist thinking such a thing, or evaluating in such a way - given that it would obliterate prospects for any positive claims and hopes at all.

On this last point obviously completely disagree with Albert. Of course, as I am a libertarian communist it should be clear to Albert therefore that he is

misrepresenting my views. As of course I do think that there is the possibility of positive change in the world.

Where Albert seems confused again is around the nature of work. We for the most part do not like work which we are compelled to do. For wage workers as a whole across the world, our interest is primarily in our wages, rather than in the work we happen to do (of course, a minority of people to work in an area which they enjoy, however it being work still strips a lot/all of this enjoyment from it).

If we remain wage workers where we are compelled to work to get by, then our interests as workers will still be in earning as much as possible to have as good a standard of living as possible, and in doing as little work as possible.

This does not mean that I do not think that it is possible to act differently, of course. But I believe the only way we will act significantly differently is if we abolish wage work.

As Chomsky points out, when working for ourselves in an un-alienated way we are happy to work hard. This is because it doesn't even feel like work.

At work I try to do as little as possible. But for myself each week I spend dozens of hours working hard on things which I enjoy, which are paid work for other people. For example, web design, editing, cooking, cleaning.

Similarly, when I was at school and I had to read things for school, I just wouldn't do it. I would just put it off and put it off. But for myself I read all the time, for fun.

As I said in my initial article, us humans are naturally inquisitive, creative and productive. But when we are forced to do things we also naturally resist them.

Most proletarians, like me, spend huge amounts of time every week carrying out activities which for some people are paid work, but for fun.

And in a better society, instead of prioritising profit, we can prioritise turning as much currently under its work as possible into fun activities, which we take part in because we enjoy them, or because we get a sense of community from collectively doing what we need to do.

All spying on each other, grassing on who isn't doing what, who is working harder than who and so who should no longer have their needs met is not conducive to this kind of collective effort.

# Monitoring effort and sacrifice

Albert goes into some detail on how effort and sacrifice can be monitored under parecon, to determine how workers should be paid.

And to be honest the type of methods he suggests are the ones I criticised in my initial post:

Briefly, duration is, time spent. There is nothing complex about measuring that. Intensity is most easily viewed/measured by workmates, again by looking, working with, etc., but output can certainly also be used as an indicator. Is Joe working like the rest of us, or is Joe taking extra long and frequent breaks and otherwise not exerting? Is Sally, working much harder. with agreement from people that it is okay to do so, taking up more than an average share of responsibility for output?

Now, first of all, there is a problem here in terms of talking about "output". Many employers today talk about that kind of objective measure, however, many of us workers do not have any sort of tangible output to our work which can be measured. How do you measure the "output" of a nurse, or a doctor, or a bus driver, or an educator?

Pretty much all workers' organisations (which are overwhelmingly very conservative compared to "revolutionaries" like parecon advocates or libertarian communist), pushed by their membership oppose monitoring of outputs. For a few reasons, including that they are often meaningless (i.e. monitoring teachers by how well pupils perform mostly is to do with how well off the parents are rather than anything to do with how good the teachers are), they are hugely time-consuming, and most importantly that they make the working environment horrible.

We should (and do) fight against this type of monitoring even under capitalism, let alone in a supposedly free society.

And as for Joe or Sally, rather than spying on them all day seeing if they are taking too many smoke breaks, I would rather get on with my own tasks and trust that however they are acting they have their own reasons.

Often when people suffer bereavement, relationship breakdown or some other kind of problem at home it can mean their work performance is affected. I don't think that grassing on them so that their pay is cut, or alternatively making them tell everyone what may be their own private business so that we

can take a vote on whether or not to cut their pay, is a practical response -let alone humane one.

And Albert has completely failed to respond to my point about how intensity/effort would be impossible to measure as you will not be able to tell between a hard-working average person and a gifted slacker. I mean before I became disabled I was able to type 80+ words a minute. Whereas many of my colleagues can only type about 40. If I was to be rewarded by my effort I would not let anyone know that I could type twice as fast as everyone else!

Onerousness, finally, is measured by workmates assessing job roles, again... the bottom line is, who measures these things, who decides issues, who agendizes and acts regarding the workplace, is always the same, in a parecon - the workers self managing that workplace.

Again, as I pointed out in my previous article, if this were introduced at my work we would just collectively vote to give each other the maximum ratings of onerousness for all of our jobs. Certainly, this would be the collectivist thing to do, and I would suspect someone suggesting otherwise would be socially ostracised like a snitch.

As but one example, suppose 100 of us work in a plant. It is part of parecon, has targets for production that fit the self managed participatory plan. We are all workers, there is no boss. Suppose the plan produces the output target as envisioned. The plant is then entitled to 100 times the average income in society. Now how is the income allotted among workers inside the plant? Well, if the plant workforce agreed to requests from 10 workers to work half time, say, and to some other workers to work double hard, or double time, or whatever - all to arrive at the planned output, then incomes would vary due to those differences. If not, incomes would be average for all. If you are convinced workers in a self managing plant would be trying to rip off one another, you might well feel that it could get pretty chaotic. But if not, then not. If the workers wanted to rip off the rest of society, they could all together claim to have worked way more than they did - or harder, which amounts to the same thing. The trouble is, in that case, why wasn't output higher? There is no extra income to disperse if the work did not generate socially valuable output.

As that this example, I must say I'm pretty shocked. This does sound very much like a Soviet style setup. I've already pointed out the problem with measuring "output". But even in this type of factory scenario where concrete outputs could be measured, there are huge numbers of problems.

What if there were problems with the equipment? Or with the component parts? Or with the local energy supply? It would be entirely unfair to cut the

wages of everyone working at a factory if they were unable to meet targets due to circumstances out of their own control. And of course different production units could put the blame on each other for any delays. So how could you determine who was really to blame, and who should really have their pay cut?

For those people who doubt the seriousness of this problem, I would suggest reading the texts I linked to in my first article going into the chronic inefficiency of the Soviet Union. Where production for planning targets basically meant that quality dropped. And faulty equipment sabotaged the entire economy.

This seems really odd to me. Parecon is the product of "anti capitalist management consultants"? It would be awfully hard to explain, in that case, how it is that parecon is arguably the only serious economic model out there that emphasizes eliminating the class division between managers - and other coordinator class members monopolizing empowering work...

I'm not going to get into an extended debate about the ridiculous idea of the "coordinator class". But to explain my point about anti-capitalist management consultants I wasn't saying that management consultants now would advise people to have workplace democracy (although some do). The point I was making was that management consultants coming and have grand ideas about what measures can be put in place to improve employee performance - like the parecon idea of reward for effort and sacrifice - which are completely unworkable and even counter-productive in practice.

With the example of performance related pay I gave above, which used to be strongly recommended by many management consultants, it is on its way out in many places in the private sector as its focus on individual reward has been shown to have a negative effect on collective productivity and performance. Collective effort is by far the most important element of work in human society, and in production, as by working collectively we are able to achieve infinitely more than we can as atomised individuals.

Is the impact on workers of this remunerative norm, in in the parecon institutional context, considered. Of course it is - that is the point. The impact is workers do not compete with one another, they have mutually shared interests, they get equitable conditions and claims on social output, they exist without having to repress or resist others with different interests, and so on.

Michael Albert asserts here that workers under parecon will have mutually shared interests. However that is not the case. In a communist society where we receive what we need from society, it is in all of our interests to contribute to society because we enjoy being creative and productive, to take part in

onerous activities in order to be socially accepted, and to contribute enough that we can all have what we need.

Under parecon individual workers will get more if they exert more effort, sacrifice more and work longer than other workers (or appear to do so). And if rewards are per enterprise as Albert outlines then it gives workers individual incentives to unfairly down rate their colleagues. Or for example say that work in another department is less onerous than in theirs, so they should be better rewarded. And if their department is bigger then they could vote this through.

The idea of having a collective, proletarian revolution, and then reverting to this type of individualistic or slightly collectivist piecework reward system - which is even more individualistic than many large capitalist or state capitalist employers today to me is completely unthinkable.

Johns says, revealing not only a pretty jaundiced view of working people - that parecon's workers would behave, and not just some of them, but essentially the whole workforce, as he says he would, and this even in an equitable economy, even with self management, even without class rule, etc.

This is perhaps the element of Albert's response which I am most offended by. And I find the point actually quite ironic.

At the centre of my politics is the idea that humans are naturally social, co-operative and productive. And do not need to be coerced into being productive by the threat of destitution or starvation. Advocates of parecon, however, do not accept this view of humans, and believe that we do need to be coerced into being productive by wages and the threat of being denied them if we do not work long hard enough.

That Albert is now claiming I have a "jaundiced" view of working people is hypocritical in the extreme. And furthermore I don't believe is valid (indeed, further down his article he even criticises me for holding the exact opposite view, see below). Far from lazy wage workers being anti-social, or workers resisting work being selfish in doing so I think is entirely laudable.

Self managed alienation and forced work is still alienation and forced work, and I think that collective resistance to alienated and enforced activity is a great thing to be encouraged.

Albert's verbal attack on workers who would continue to resist sounds a lot like Soviet denunciations of workers who weren't doing their bit to build the glorious socialist society, now that they didn't have owners anymore.

Seriously? After struggling for a new, equitable, self managing, classless economy, what Johns thinks is that in it, to implement equitable remuneration, means spying on one another, etc. Well, I admit that this is a point various parecon advocates do wonder about.

I would like to point out Albert that this spying is exactly what he has advocated in his response to me.

To what extent, in a parecon, with equitable remuneration, would there be tight, or very loose accounting of duration, intensity, and onerousness, and how precisely would workers implement their arrangements? For the latter, however they choose. That is what self management means. For the former, however, I think, for example, that whatever roads lead to its implementation, in a parecon, at least after it has operated for a time, most folks will decide that fraud is a relatively small issue and the need for close attention to claims about duration and intensity is relatively slight, and even the number of levels of remuneration that ought to exist is quite low - as in, say, way over average (meaning perhaps 20% over), over average (meaning 10% over), average, under average (meaning 10% below), and way under average (meaning 20% below). Others might think the range of incomes folks should be entitled to earn should be wider and the precision of them more accurate. Different workplaces might opt for different arrangements. But the main point is, different workers, and different firms and industries, can opt, via self management, for different approaches in their own workplaces ways of measuring and allotting income for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor.

Now, this paragraph doesn't sound that bad. I think that Albert is right to say that in a rationally organised society, fraud would be a minor issue. If you say you are communist people often respond by saying "what would you do about freeloaders?". When actually under capitalism we have huge numbers of "freeloaders". Apart from people who don't work because they don't want to, and the tens of millions of people working in socially useless jobs (like the military, finance, insurance, etc) there are millions more people who want to be productive but are part of the mass of the unemployed.

However, I don't think this is an argument for parecon, but an argument for communism: for people to receive what they need from society.

Especially if Albert is saying that wages would be on a range of 80% of average-120% of average. If that is the case, then what is the point of reward for effort and sacrifice? If you earn doing zero hours worked per week only a tiny bit less than if you work 80 hours a week then why would you bother?

Of course, no one would want to do zero hours of productive activity in a week, because that would be far more onerous than carrying out a good few hours productive activity. But I believe this is evidence that keeping wages is unnecessary.

Other parecon advocates in the comments below my first article also stated that under parecon people would also be paid the average wage while not working, between jobs, or while studying.

And again I believe this demonstrates that all the work and potential problems with measuring and remunerating effort and sacrifice are unnecessary and counter-productive.

Johns says, "Additionally, if effort and sacrifice is what is rewarded, then if your team comes up with some new equipment or new processes which make the work easier, then you would have to do keep them secret, in order not to have your pay reduced. And of course this would be highly detrimental to society as a whole - as a rational economy would be based on trying to minimize the amount of work and effort which would have to be done."

In fact, in parecon there is every interest, for every citizen, in developing technology that reduces the onerousness of labor and increases output per effort expended... And there are no adverse effects from innovations on people's incomes. Why? Because, over time, jobs alter and are balanced, innovations spreading since there are no copyrights, etc.

This doesn't counteract my argument. There still would be the incentive for people to keep innovations secret, as it would enable them to increase their wages while decreasing the amount they had to work and the onerousness of their work.

Albert then goes into a hypothetical case study to try to demonstrate that this would be pointless, however his points are based on poor assumptions. Like saying that the workplace would have a fixed workforce every day. To me it sounds like this counteracts parecon's balanced job complexes. And that people would notice if the workplace was closed. But who's going to be aware of what workplaces are meant to be open when? And it implies that work under parecon will be very similar to how it is now in terms of there being specific workplaces open at specific times. Whereas in a rational economy we should have much more flexibility in terms of where we "work" and when.

Suppose Johns is right that people would do this - and their benefit would be that they spend four hours each day in the workplace playing cards. What

would it take to prevent it. How about a job in the economy which is to research workplace effectivity...by visiting. Done.

Here we get to the crux of the problem I think. Albert is acknowledging that parecon would need paid spies to monitor workers. I've already gone into most of my issues with this.

But one point I would like to meet again is that this would be another pointless job which people would have to do, which would actually waste time which we could otherwise use constructively. Rather than me have an "jaundiced" view of working people, I don't think we need to be spied on and compelled. So in effect I guess I'm saying "no u".

And of course many of us who work now have to put up with occasional visits and inspections from outsiders or consultants. And we know how to fool them, I'm afraid. We can put on a show while they're about. So to this Michael could respond, well in that case instead of outside specialist "workplace effectivity (sic)" researchers (who sound a lot like they would be part of a "coordinator class" if you believe in such a thing [and probably look like the guy in the picture at the top of my first article, lol]) you could have people inside workplaces doing this -but then you have managers again. Or at best a Stasi style network of informants. But of course if parecon is open and transparent then these informants would have to be named publicly. And of course their role would set them against their colleagues, so to incentivise them to grass on their coworkers they would have to be rewarded in some way, presumably with additional pay. But then of course you have managers/coordinators again.

But truly, there is no point in us now trying to figure out every variant structure people in the future might opt for. Future workers will decide their own paths. There is point in our determining a set of core institutions that are workable, viable, and that would generate not anti social attitudes, like those Johns claims he would manifest, but solidarity and mutual aid; not domination and subordination, but self management; not class division and class rule, but classlessness.

This point is attempting to be insulting. And I'm sorry to disappoint Michael Albert, but I'm an extremely pro-social individual. Even at work I always go the extra mile to help out my colleagues.

But I repeat my assertion that resisting alienated, enforced labour is not anti-social in the slightest. In fact I think it's about the most pro-social thing you can do!

If bureaucrats in the Soviet Union hadn't paid themselves better than ordinary workers, and say rotated regularly as well, this wouldn't change anything significant about the nature of the Soviet Union. (The little bit of extra salary money spread out wouldn't have made any significant difference to the mass of workers. And the state bureaucrats didn't act the way they did because they were evil people, but because of the institutional roles they occupied and the pressures they came under as a result.) Workers there would still have been right to resist as they did.

## Work versus productive activity

I'm feeling bad about having to repeat the same points again and again, especially as I was trying to keep this response brief. But the same strawmen keep cropping up again and again in Albert's response. So sorry to have to repeat this but in response to this:

But the heart of the matter, again, is Johns sad and defeatist slight of hand - that typically is the exact opposite of the mindset of libertarian communists - which the libcom site represents, I believe. That is, the formulation that everyone will try to fuck over everyone else in a good society, merely because they get incomes - which is true in any society - even as they do in a rotten, classist, market system.

As I have already pointed out, this is the exact opposite of my actual point of view. I emphatically **do not believe** that in a good society (especially one following a proletarian revolution, where collective solidarity would have to have become the most powerful force in society) people will try to fuck each other over.

I think where Albert is having trouble understanding what I'm saying is that I do not believe that parecon is a model of a good, free society, if it contains wages.

Johns says, "if anyone thinks I am over estimating this they would do well to read these accounts of how widespread shirking effectively destroyed East Germany and wore down the Soviet Union." Suppose that was true - which I think in fact it is a large exaggeration of this one factor - it is even in that case amazing to me that Johns doesn't realize, apparently, that what he is saying, which is that as bad as things are, anywhere, is what they must be, everywhere, always. If in the Soviet Union and the U.S. workers try to finagle greater income and less work to whatever degree they can get away with, than that will be true, in a parecon, and, I should think, in any system - or else, why in a parecon?

As I have said repeatedly, this tendency has proved correct for wage workers. But not in societies, such as "primitive" communist and some indigenous societies without wage work.

And here is the incredible punchline. Suppose we take Johns at face value. We assume he really feels all this after serious assessment, and that if he hasn't paid much attention to what he is critiquing it is only because he read someone who led him to believe there was no need, because it was so transparently dumb, or something like that. Libcom, and probably Johns, thinks that what we should really favor for remuneration in a good society is that each person should work the amount they choose to, and consume as much as they wish to. This is what the young Chomsky argued, as well. But there is a big difference. The young Chomsky had an optimistic view of workers' motives and inclinations. Johns has a pessimistic one.

This is completely incorrect. I have the same optimistic view as Chomsky.

Johns says, "if a revolution doesn't abolish `work' as a distinct activity separate from the rest of life, then workers will always fight against it."

I have no idea what Johns even thinks he means by this. I would be curious to find out. Work, which is producing socially valuable outputs, is not the same as my taking a bath, washing a floor, raising a child, playing a game, dancing, and so on. If all these latter activities are distinct things we can talk about, then so is work.

I am quite bemused as to why Albert doesn't understand this quite simple point. Albert I'm sure must be aware of the existence of societies where work didn't exist. And I'm sure he must be aware that for the majority of human existence "work" did not exist.

Albert's idea of what work is I think throws up more problems with parecon, including some quite worrying ones. He says quite definitively that washing a floor, raising a child, playing a game and dancing are not "work". And of course he's right in that they are not inherently "work". Many people do those things either for fun or through obligation. But under capitalism all of those things are also "work" which some people are paid wages to do, and these people as a result do not enjoy these activities to the same extent when they are counted as "leisure". And of course they resist them. Cleaners, nursery nurses, play workers and dancers all resist work individually and in many cases do so collectively with strikes to defend or improve their conditions -to either work less and earn more, or slow the rate at which they work more and earn less (sadly under austerity it is more often the latter).

I say worrying because I do find it concerning that the socially "useful" work Albert refers to throughout his response is primarily manufacturing work which historically is predominantly male, whereas the tasks he refers to which do not constitute "work" in his view: cleaning, childcare, etc are predominantly female-dominated and mostly grossly underpaid.

Cleaning, childcare and dance are all needed by society as much as factories.

In a decent society, there will be no distinction between work, play and leisure in this way. Indeed, keeping a distinction can be inherently discriminatory. See all the unpaid work throughout the world carried out by women which is totally unrewarded.

Tasks which need to be done which aren't enjoyable in any way at present, we can try to reorganise to make them as enjoyable and un-onerous as possible. But even now boring tasks like washing up we do anyway without problems as we know that our standard of living with clean dishes is better than without. And if we just expected everyone else to do it for us then we would be socially ostracised.

And of course what matters more than financial reward to everyone is social acceptance and community.



It really is incredible that Johns thinks this constitutes serious analysis. Everything but what he favors must be capitalism in disguise. Somehow it seems that Johns thinks that if we simply say everyone can have anything they say they need, and can do any amount they say they want to do - suddenly everyone will not only behave wonderfully by internal inclination, but also will know quite well what actions constitute behaving wonderfully.

Here Albert has tied himself in a bit of a knot. Having just accused me of having an unacceptably pessimistic view of human nature, he now dismissively implies that I have a naive faith that people will behave naturally "wonderfully". I would say that Albert should make up his mind of what he thinks my views are.

I do think that people are naturally cooperative and social (unless put under external pressure not to be so, as we are under capitalism). And as for knowing what actions specifically "constitute behaving wonderfully", this article

has already gone on far too long and I've already said are not interested in the minutiae of a communist society, however I will just say that I don't think paying people according to how hard or long they work helps anyone determine what is a socially beneficial behaviour. And I don't think that Albert has demonstrated anywhere that this would be the case.

## Conclusion

In summary, I contend that remuneration by effort and sacrifice: supposedly "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" would be neither fair nor practical.

And especially if regardless of effort and sacrifice the proposed differences in remuneration were only 80% of the mean wage to 120% of the mean then the building in of complex structures of monitoring and accounting would be a waste of resources. And that's not to even mention the social costs of having people spying on each other.

If, like me, Michael Albert or anyone else does acknowledge that human beings are naturally creative and social, then they should realise that we do not need to be compelled to work as we are now. We don't need the wage system.

In a free society we wouldn't just sit around doing nothing until we starved. We could organise society on the basis of fulfilling human needs and desires in as joyful ways as possible. And we could decide exactly how to do this by ourselves, collectively, at the time.



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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately it has come to my attention that this image has been lost on some non-UK resident readers. [This video](#) should explain.