

Contributionism

An Economic System for People, Not Profit

Introduction

Contributionism starts with a simple observation: poverty is a self-inflicted problem.

We live in a world with rampant economic inequality. The gap between the richest and poorest people in society continues to grow year after year¹. The richest people in the world hold so much wealth that they literally cannot spend it. Meanwhile, a much larger group of people can barely make ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck and having to decide between keeping the lights on and putting food on the table.

Poverty isn't caused by a lack of resources. We produce more food than is needed to feed everyone², and have more vacant houses than there are homeless families³. It isn't caused by complex logistical issues. We have globe-spanning next-day deliveries for just about anything. So if it's not a problem with resources or distribution, what is it?

In one word: money. Everyone needs money to live. The poor are desperate for any little scrap of it, and will accept paltry wages as better than nothing. The rich are desperate to hoard more of it, to grow their fortune faster than their rivals for social status and power. Thus, the poor are compelled to work for the rich, and will happily take the place of workers who demand higher wages. The rich are compelled to hoard ever more, working systematically to keep wages low and prices high. Growth is compelled, and poverty enables growth.

No wonder poverty seems so intractable.

Originally, Contributionism intended to solve poverty by eliminating money. If everyone could access food, shelter, and clothing without any need to pay for it, there would be no poverty. However, it isn't just money that needs to be rejected. It is the social control that comes with hoarding resources that others need to survive. It is the mindset that growth should be pursued for growth's sake. It is the notion that everything in life only has utility as an investment, and that you lose if you don't get back more than you put in.

Contributionism, at its core, is the assertion that no price be set on a person's life. Only when someone can have their needs met without restriction do they have the freedom to pursue their own interests and contribute to the lives of others. This is not a system built on poverty as a tool of control, but one built on stability as a foundation for generosity.

This document aims to define Contributionism from the bottom up. First, by defining a set of philosophical axioms that must be accepted in order for the system to make sense. Second, by building on those axioms to create requirements for how a Contributionist society must function. Third, by providing possible examples of real systems that would satisfy those requirements. Finally, by explaining how the real world might be able to transition to this new system.

¹ [Trends in income and wealth inequality](#)

² [Can we feed the world and ensure no one goes hungry?](#)

³ [Homelessness & Empty Homes - Trends & COVID-19 Impact](#)

What are the assumptions?

Our current society has propagated certain assumptions about how societies must work and how people operate. This section aims to present a new set of assumptions, using our modern understanding of human psychology and philosophy, that will set the groundwork for Contributionism as a system.

The **Axiom of Plenty** asserts that it is immoral to deny anyone access to plentiful resources. If there is enough for everyone, it is immoral to not give to everyone. This sets the tone for an ideal society, where the point of production is to meet people's needs, not to artificially withhold resources from people to gain a larger slice of the economic pie.

The **Axiom of Humanity** asserts that, despite humanity's various differences, everyone is human. Everyone has understandable reasons for the things they do, and more often than not are trying to do right by themselves and others according to their own worldview. It's not useful to think about others as inherently evil, lazy, irrational, or otherwise incapable of constructively working with you. This reframes society as people all trying to live the best they can together, not as a group of the Good plagued by an infection of the Bad.

The **Axiom of Equality** asserts that all people have equal claim to decisions about how society is run. Nobody is inherently destined to rule through blood or intelligence, and everyone is an expert in their own lives. This directly rejects society as one best ruled by the superior over the inferior, and instead casts society as a group of equals all working together to survive.

The **Axiom of Directness** asserts that society should avoid trying to solve problems by solving a semi-related problem and hoping the solution spills over. Doing so just gives cover for people to pick "solutions" that don't really help but do benefit themselves. This reorients people on how to address problems, from having a set system that you can just push some buttons on and hope they fix things, to being able to reshape systems entirely to better meet peoples' needs.

Taken together, these axioms inevitably point towards a system where everyone works together to provide the things people need. They don't do so because they can't survive otherwise, but because that's what people naturally do when they no longer need to worry about survival. It is a system that recognizes the ways that everyone contributes to the world merely by forming relationships with others, and rejects the idea that anyone could be thought to contribute nothing. Everyone is entitled to the products of society simply for being part of it.

Many of these axioms run directly counter to a lot of deeply, societally ingrained ideas about human nature. Thus, each section includes critiques a reasonable person might levy to counter them. If you were to be convinced of these axioms, a Contributionist society would not only seem reasonable but even natural! Everything else in this document is just an exercise in taking these axioms to their logical conclusion and then making that conclusion concrete.

Axiom of Plenty

In a society where a resource is plentiful, it is morally unacceptable for any person in that society to be denied access to that resource.

The most obvious examples are basic human needs; food, water, clothing, shelter, and so on. If everyone can have what they need, then denying these needs effectively means denying life. Moreover, anything a person must do in order to obtain these needs becomes coerced. They can't refuse, or else they die. If we want a world where people have real freedom, everyone must have free access to all necessities.

There are a couple important points to make about this axiom.

First, this axiom does not apply to non-plentiful resources. If there isn't enough to go around, then no matter what method you choose to decide who gets what, some people will be left out. Let's say limited food is distributed to the people who do some minimal amount of labor; if there isn't enough for everyone, then even people who meet that minimum will still starve through no fault of their own. This is why it is far more important to focus on how to produce enough for everyone, rather than worrying about who gets what.

Second, "access" is the key word. This axiom is not about force-feeding people who refuse food, and it cannot be satisfied with a system where food is plentiful but some people can't get it. It means these plentiful resources must be accessible by the elderly and disabled, and cannot be predicated on the ability to drive or walk long distances or take time off of work. To a degree, this means that access can't even be merely inconvenient, since one person's inconvenience may be another person's impossibility, or may become impossible under a bad set of circumstances. Everyone needs to be able to actually get what they need.

Third, this axiom truly applies to everyone. Rich, poor, young, old, saint, sinner, whatever gender, whatever race, whatever ability, whichever country. Every single person, no matter how much or how little that person happens to contribute back to society. The only reason to limit access to one person would be to guarantee it for others, and even then it should be the subject of strict scrutiny. Generally speaking, if you are going to deny life-sustaining resources to someone, even assuming you are the one that should have power to do so in the first place, it had better be because there's no other good option.

Finally, this axiom also applies to non-necessary goods that are plentiful. By definition, denying non-necessary resources is less drastic than denying necessary resources, so the moral weight is certainly far less. However, it can be near impossible to truly judge whether something is necessary or not. In our current society, people will lambast the poor for having a cell phone but saying they don't have enough money for food or rent. Cell phones are treated as a non-necessity. However, pretty much any job application requires some mechanism for contact, and cell phones are the single most convenient. Even interviews can sometimes be done over the phone. Denying access to a cell phone won't kill someone outright, but it makes their path to getting a job and earning money far harder. In a real sense, the cell phone is necessary for someone to operate effectively in society, or at least it isn't something frivolous.

This line is fuzzy and can result in terrible outcomes if someone judges wrong, so this axiom applies to all abundant resources and not just those deemed “necessary.”

Critique: People will do the least amount of work necessary, so they need to face the threat of starvation to be motivated to work

According to this critique, people need external motivation in order to do anything productive. If all of their needs are being taken care of, then they will logically simply coast along in life. If everyone did this, then there would be nobody to produce food and shelter and clothing. This would cause those resources to become scarce, which would lead to people dying. If instead we only gave food to the people who worked for it, then the only people who would die would be the ones unwilling to contribute.

To answer this critique, it's important to understand how external motivation works.⁴ If you promise to give someone a reward for a task, their goal is to figure out how to get that reward in the most efficient way possible. The reward becomes the goal. This falls in line with the critique. However, if you don't give someone a reward for a task, then their goal is merely how to perform the task the best way possible. The task becomes the goal. This goes against the secondary assertion of the critique, that without external motivation people will do nothing. Instead, people will look towards internal motivation.

There are a bunch of secondary effects that happen when you remove rewards from a task. First, people end up being more creative. They don't have to worry about trying something new and failing, because they won't lose a reward if they fail. This lets them find new riskier solutions that are better than the reliable ones they know. Second, people end up working harder. When the task is the goal, you aren't done until you finish the task in a satisfying way. When you are given a reward, you are done when you get the reward. Third, people start enjoying the task more. If someone offers to pay you to do something, it makes you think that the task is unpleasant, and that nobody would do it unless they were paid. Without a reward, the task is something to explore and be curious about.

What about tasks that inherently have an external reward? Take farming. When you complete the task, you have food to eat. There is only a minimum amount of farming you need to do in order to have enough to eat. Why would a farmer produce more than they need for themselves and their families?

The key is in the last part of the question, “and their families.” Why would a farmer produce more than they personally need? It feels like a silly question. Of course you would provide for your loved ones, why wouldn't you? In fact, everyone does work, almost always for free, for their families and close relatives. It almost seems offensive to expect payment. This same reason can apply to the community as a whole.

As one last point, it's pretty distasteful to claim that the “reward” people need to be productive is... living. Who exactly can have the authority to dispense such a reward? This

⁴ [Grading is a Scam \(and Motivation is a Myth\) | A Professor Explains. Zoe Bee](#)

critique is frequently used by business owners to discuss how best to motivate their workers. It is rarely applied to the business owners themselves. In that sense, it is the sort of thing one says about animals you own, not people you cooperate with.

Critique: Some people deserve to be denied resources as punishment

This critique asserts that certain people, through their nature or their actions, have basically forfeited their rights. If the previous critique claimed that access should be withheld to motivate, this one claims it should be withheld to deter. Usually this critique applies to criminals (often the most heinous ones), but it can also be applied to the lazy or selfish.

To answer this critique, you need to look at the underlying assumption. Namely, that punishment deters crime. If it did, then it would be reasonable to think withholding plentiful resources would be an effective way to reduce crime. The overwhelming answer, though, is that it does not.⁵ Factually speaking, the best deterrence is to increase the certainty that you would be caught. People don't commit crimes assuming they will be caught, so the magnitude of the punishment is rarely a factor. Moreover, if the intent is to just cause suffering, it turns out that people quickly adapt to their circumstances.⁶ Deprivation of access, therefore, does not work well to cause suffering. At least, not until you start inflicting torture by doing so.

If not deterrence or retribution, is there any reason to deny a person access to resources? There is one, and that is incapacitation. If someone is trying to poison the water supply or spoil a stockpile of grain, it makes sense to prevent that access to stop them from causing widespread harm. There may also be reasons to limit a person's access for the purpose of rehabilitation. This has to be temporary, though, and for a specific purpose, otherwise it veers into deterrence or retribution territory.

Critique: If people don't struggle, it makes them weak

This critique asserts that, even if society could provide everyone with the necessities for free for a time, that society would damage the moral or spiritual fabric of its people. It can be neatly summed up in the phrase "strong people make good times, good times make weak people, weak people make hard times, hard times make strong people." Limiting access to resources would thus be a method to simulate hard times so that people become strong.

So, is this true? Do people who struggle end up stronger? The answer isn't clear.⁷ On the one hand, people often do report having grown after a traumatic experience. On the other hand, people often do the same for positive experiences, and there isn't any strong correlation on how much people think they've improved versus how they actually have. There are certainly clear cases where struggle leaves people more anxious or with life-long disabilities, though some might argue those people gain other skills in the process.

⁵ [Five Things About Deterrence](#)

⁶ [Retribution and the Experience of Punishment](#)

⁷ [Do we actually grow from adversity?](#)

To look at this from another perspective, you could look at work requirements for welfare programs. This is one way a society might choose to limit access to resources, by requiring some certain amount of labor to earn those benefits. If struggle helps people develop character, then perhaps adding work requirements to welfare might increase the rate at which people escape poverty. If there were no such requirements, perhaps people would fail to develop the skills they need and would stay in poverty longer.

So, do work requirements help people get out of poverty faster? No.⁸ The United States has a long history of attaching work requirements to various forms of governmental assistance, and there is no evidence that doing so helps recipients get better jobs. Often, the reason a person needs assistance in the first place is because they either can't work or can't find a job, so adding a work requirement just adds insult to injury. Meanwhile, the monitoring needed to verify that people are meeting the requirements makes it more likely that people who genuinely do qualify don't get the benefits they earned, either by confusing paperwork and deadlines or other human-caused issues.

Meanwhile, this whole framework implies that there are some people with the power to withhold plentiful resources from others. I, the person in power, need to determine how best to motivate you, the person not in power. I don't need to worry about struggling, I already have what I need. It's you, who don't have what you need, that we need to worry about.

The person already struggling is the one who is being regulated.

There are plenty of ways people can voluntarily take on challenges and improve themselves without needing to make it a life or death situation. In fact, it's well established that children learn best when presented with curated challenges that are only just beyond what they are capable of.⁹ Forcing children to solve math problems to earn their next meal, and starving them until they do, is hardly the way to go. So it is with all people.

Critique: There's no such thing as a free lunch

This famous critique notes that there is nothing in life that truly comes without cost. If society were to provide "free" food to everyone, all that means is that the person who puts in the effort to grow and prepare that food doesn't get reimbursed for their efforts. Someone, somewhere is paying a cost, and how can you expect people to do so without getting anything in return? It would be impossible for such a system to be self-sustaining.

Unfortunately, there isn't any real-world data on societies that make all of the essentials available for free. Rationing systems in the Soviet Union aren't the same, and neither are even the most robust welfare systems in capitalistic societies. Thus, this critique needs to be handled from a philosophical angle.

The core question to answer is, why do people who produce a plentiful resource need to receive anything in return? In part, the answer depends on how the rest of society is structured.

⁸ [What research tells us about work requirements](#)

⁹ [Zone of proximal development](#)

If plentiful resources are free, but non-plentiful resources cost money, then a person would need to produce non-plentiful resources in order to be able to afford other non-plentiful resources. Trying to make anything free in that system would be difficult, if not impossible, unless producing plentiful resources requires so little effort that it doesn't harm a person's ability to earn money. If that was the only issue, the answer would be to make everything free (spoilers).

What about the concept of "fairness?" Is there some psychological reason people would need to receive something in exchange for their labor? Is there some innate reason why people would be jealous or resentful towards people who don't work as hard as they do?

The answer is "sort of," but it isn't completely straightforward. There are experiments that show people have hard-wired negative reactions to perceived unfair situations and positive reactions to perceived fair ones.¹⁰ More interestingly, they show that such reactions are contextual: the same amount of reward can be considered fair in one context and unfair in another. There's also research suggesting that the fairness of a process can be even more important than the outcome.¹¹ If someone gets the outcome they want, but through a process that seems unfair, they can be just as unhappy as if they didn't get the outcome they wanted. Finally, there is other research showing that what is considered "fair" can differ between different cultures.¹² While all humans want things to be "fair," they can differ greatly in terms of how to achieve that goal.

All of this research together indicates that it is possible for the idea that a person must be reimbursed for their labor is more of a cultural idea of fairness than an innate one. We can't rely strictly on the intuitions formed in a Capitalistic society for what would be considered fair or fair in a non-Capitalistic one. Perhaps in a Contributionist society, fairness would be defined more in terms of whether you help other people in good faith where you can rather than whether your day-to-day labor is reimbursed. After all, if nobody is rewarded for their labor, then there's no reason to view that result as unfair.

Axiom of Humanity

People all operate in similar ways. They are all social creatures that operate reasonably (at least internally) and tend to want to do right by themselves and by others.

The point of this axiom is not to assert that people are always good to each other. That would be demonstrably wrong. Nor is it an assertion that people operate in identical ways, as in seeing the same information and processing it the exact same way. Instead, the point is like the feeling of sonder, the sudden realization that other people lead as deep and complex a life as you do. It is an assertion that people have reasons for the things they do, and more often than not those reasons make sense in context. It also is an assertion that people can be understood, and that by understanding someone you can find ways to encourage them to do less harm and more good.

¹⁰ [Fairness and Cooperation are Rewarding](#)

¹¹ [Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy](#)

¹² [Some basic notions of fairness are culturally constructed](#)

The importance of this axiom can be illustrated by looking at its absence. In the United States, a common refrain among gun advocates is that criminals will always do evil, and gun laws won't stop them from arming themselves. Thus, gun laws should be abolished so non-criminals can arm themselves as well. That assumption that laws don't stop criminals from doing bad things can seem like a no-brainer if you think of a criminal as an almost inhuman monster dedicated solely and fervently towards doing crime. If you think of criminals as people, though, then you realize that gun laws can at least reduce the amount of guns and the ease of access, making crime harder to commit and thus less appealing. The data, though not completely conclusive, support this more human idea.¹³

Critique: People frequently make irrational decisions, so society can't rely on the bulk of humanity acting reasonably

This critique points to specific examples of people making decisions that are irrational in some way. For example, when people vote for policies that go directly against their own self interest. Additionally, people have a long history of being bigoted against others, and of that bigotry causing them to advocate for laws and societal norms that enforce their bigotry. How can any society expect people to act in reasonable ways without some heavy-handed laws or authority to stop them from acting irrationally?

What does the research say about how and why people behave irrationally? Is it random, or predictable?

It turns out that there is an actual common understanding, across cultures, of the difference between acting reasonably and acting rationally.¹⁴ Rationality is generally about making decisions that maximize self-interest, regardless of the effects on others. Reasonableness is generally about making decisions that take into account a broader context, like the effects on others or the process in which the decision takes place. It turns out that when people are considered to be acting irrationally, they are likely just acting reasonably instead. Maybe they make decisions that will benefit a stranger equally when they could, without downside, benefit only themselves, for example.

How does this address the critique? The main point is that people do not generally behave randomly. They don't behave "irrationally" in that sense. When people fail to make "rational," i.e. self-interest-maximizing, choices, they are generally making reasonable ones instead. Or at least choices that seem reasonable to them. That suggests that people can be understood, and that we can interrogate why people act the way they do and find ways to disincentivize people from behaving in ways that hurt others.

To bring up the example from the axiom, pretty much nobody is evil simply for the sake of being evil. It is ok to have a system where people are generally expected to act reasonably or rationally, as opposed to randomly.

¹³ [A huge international study on gun control finds strong evidence that it actually works](#)

¹⁴ [Folk standards of sound judgement: Rationality Versus Reasonableness](#)

Axiom of Equality

All people are experts of something, and deserve the ability to use that expertise to decide how society functions.

At a bare minimum, everyone is an expert of their own lives, lived experiences, and preferences. Since the way society functions impacts that lived experience, everyone deserves an equal say in how society should operate. There is no blood right of kings, no intellectual class, just a big group of people all with similar and differing preferences trying to figure out how to live with each other. Even children should at least have some say in how they are treated, even if we recognize that they are doing so from a limited perspective and inexperience.

This axiom is inherently anti-hierarchical. It rejects the idea that some people are better suited to general leadership above the masses of commoners. Just like everyone is an expert in something, nobody is an expert in everything, so nobody is capable of truly leading in all areas. That doesn't mean that some people don't have more experience in certain areas or can't be better suited to leadership in specific fields. It just means that anyone with those skills would be equally suitable, and that even people without those skills deserve to have a say in the world they live in.

This axiom explicitly rejects the idea that societal standing and power is something that can be given or taken from others. Participation in how society works is not a right bestowed to some people from others, it is an avoidable consequence of being part of society.

This might be a little hard to accept for people who currently hold that power. Maybe they would be afraid that historically oppressed groups would use this newfound equality to oppress them back. The thing is, co-equal relationships must be such that sometimes things go your way and sometimes they don't. That's not revenge, that's just an unavoidable aspect of group decision-making. Plus, those groups are people as well who debate the morality of eye-for-an-eye thinking and are just as capable as you of coming to equitable conclusions.

Critique: Some people are more intelligent than others, and should therefore be the leaders of society

This critique asserts the existence and validity of IQ, a measurement of a person's general intelligence. Because this measurement varies, and because a higher score means a better ability to reason and make decisions, the people with the highest scores should be the ones in charge. If not, the people with the lower scores would make bad decisions that would destroy society. Aren't most inventions the result of singularly brilliant individuals, anyway? Why not harness that innovation and creativity for everyone?

There are a lot of issues with this critique. First, intelligence is not something that can be fully described by a single score.¹⁵ Different sorts of tasks require different areas of the brain, and a person can be more or less capable in each area rather than either capable or not at any

¹⁵ [Fractionating Human Intelligence](#)

task. Second, IQ tests themselves have a pseudoscientific history that often uses false (and frequently racist) correlations to justify harmful policies.¹⁶ Third, history's great inventions are more often group efforts, and the focus on singular individuals tends to obscure the contributions of minority groups.¹⁷ Fourth, it turns out that even people who are undeniably at the top of their field are just more specialized in their area, not generally more capable than the rest of the population.¹⁸

All of this is to show that the idea of a singularly intelligent person is a fiction. People can be specialized in what they do or have more experience in certain areas, but even that doesn't translate well to other areas. This research shows why the idea of having single leaders in control of everything is a flawed one. We certainly want people who know what they're doing, but nobody knows everything, so nobody can actually fill that sort of leadership role.

Even if you drop the idea that people can be singular leaders, but still desire experts to be in charge, keep in mind that a "leader of society" is tasked with making decisions that affect people's day-to-day lives. Those people, at the very least, should be considered to be experts in their own lives and should thus have a say in how they are run.

Axiom of Directness

If you want to solve some problem, be clear about what the problem is and tackle it directly. Don't rely on solving some loosely related problem hoping that the original would be solved by proxy.

The archetype for the sort of problem this axiom tries to solve is the concept of "trickle-down economics." The stated problem is that workers don't have enough money to buy the things they need. Their wages are too low. The proposed solution is to give tons of tax breaks to Capitalists, who have a lot of money, with the hope that they'd pass that extra wealth down to workers and pay higher wages. Of course, there's no strings attached to the tax breaks, nor any law stating workers wages must rise if the tax breaks go into effect.

"Trickle-down economics" simply does not work¹⁹. It should be clear why. The whole point of a Capitalist system is for people to get as much wealth as they can. If Capitalists are given huge tax breaks with no strings attached, that's just free money. Companies keep promising that they will raise wages and keep the economy rolling so they can receive bailouts during hard times, and they keep using those bailouts to enrich shareholders and CEOs instead²⁰. Companies don't view workers as people to share profit with, they view them as costs to be managed and kept low.

¹⁶ [The Bell Curve. Shaun](#)

¹⁷ [The Black innovators who elevated the United States: Reassessing the Golden Age of Invention](#)

¹⁸ ["It's not rocket science" and "It's not brain surgery"—"It's a walk in the park": prospective comparative study](#)

¹⁹ [The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich](#)

²⁰ [There is no connection between the stock market and reality](#)

So, data-wise, trickle-down doesn't work. But, why? At its heart, trickle-down economics is based on indirectness. Inject money into this one part of the system, and it will indirectly spread out and benefit this other part of the system. That's just one possibility, though. It turns out that another possibility is that Capitalists just keep all the money for themselves, or for their investors. The problem with indirect problem solving is that you don't actually have any guarantee that the system will work the way you expect. Without any strings attached to bailouts or tax breaks, Capitalists will (as they should in a Capitalist system) simply find the best way to enrich themselves.

Always be clear about what problem you are trying to solve, and try to solve it directly. Don't rely on roundabout solutions, since those are more open to failure and abuse.

Critique: Sometimes the obvious solution is actually harmful in the long term

This critique can be embodied by the famous saying: "Give a person a fish and they will eat for a day. Teach a person to fish, and they will eat for a lifetime." Said another way, the direct solution may not be viable for the long term. Some go further and claim that the direct solution might even be directly harmful, as it might discourage people from developing the skills or the character to solve their own problems long term.

The core problem with this critique is that it obscures the fact that there are two different problems. Starvation is immediate, and giving someone a fish solves that problem. Self-sufficiency is longer term, but it's difficult or impossible to focus on that long term problem when facing starvation.

This isn't just a theoretical issue. In reality, society tends to be in favor of the "teaching a person to fish" solution to tackle poverty and homelessness. Well, in practice, it's more like "make a person's life miserable if they don't have fish to motivate them." There's a fear that giving people the things they need directly will just make them worse off in the long run.

So, is direct aid effective to combat poverty and homelessness? Actually, yes! It turns out that giving poor people cash increases their overall outcomes and wellbeing, while having limited or no adverse affects on their willingness to work²¹. Giving homeless people houses ends up being a more cost-effective way to improve their lives than other, more roundabout methods²². The direct approach genuinely works. This is because it's often external, resource or access-driven factors that cause poverty, not internal ones²³.

It is true that direct solutions to some problems can make other problems worse. This is particularly true with drug addiction, which hijacks a person's ability to make decisions about any money they may have. In this case, the addiction needs to be addressed first, before other forms of aid can be effective.

²¹ [The Impact of Cash Transfers: A Review of the Evidence from Low- and Middle-income Countries](#)

²² [The most cost-effective way to help the homeless is to give them homes](#)

²³ [11 Top Causes of Global Poverty](#)

What is Contributionism?

The central tenet of Contributionism is simple. **Everyone should contribute to the lives of others, consensually and in whatever ways are doable.**

There are many ways in which people can contribute to the lives of others. Growing food, making tools and toys, providing emotional support, playing games, and even just hanging out. Different things will be more doable or more interesting for different people. The goal is for everyone to be able to do the things they want to do and live the life they want to live, while also banding together to do what is necessary so that others can do the same.

There is no “must” in this central tenet. There is no secret punishment for those who don’t contribute, and in fact it’s nearly impossible to not contribute while still existing in relationships with others. You don’t help your friends and family with something by making it conditional, you do it because you can and because it’s nice to see other people happy. Following Contributionism’s central tenet gives everyone the stability in their lives to allow them to be generous with their time and energy, which further enables more contribution and more stability. Rest, and the ability to not work when wanted, is just another aspect of that stability.

The rest of this section will explore how a Contributionist society would work in the abstract. There are many different forms of Contributionism that would be possible, since the core tenet is so broad. The goal is to offer a checklist that any form of Contributionism must meet, and to further flesh out what Contributionism means in principle.

Everything is free

According to the Axiom of Plenty, everyone must have free access to any plentiful resources. Contributionism takes this one step further. In a Contributionist society, nothing is given a cost or a value. There is no systematic form of currency or barter. If you need something, and someone can provide it, you can have it without giving anything in return. This is in keeping with the central tenet, which keeps the focus on what people can do for others and not on what reward they get in exchange.

What’s the catch? What do people have to give up in order to obtain this utopian society where everyone can freely benefit from the work of others while not compelling that work?

The simple answer is “trade.” Under capitalism, goods and services aren’t valuable simply for what they are, but what they can get you. “Opportunity costs,” “investment,” and even the notion of “capital” itself are all ways in which Capitalism assigns value according to what it can get you in the future. It can get to the point where the wealthiest people in the world see money itself only as a mechanism to gain more wealth. Under this mindset, you lose if you don’t get out more than you put in, even if what you get out is more than enough to live a nice life. Everything becomes speculation.

Contributionism rejects this mindset, and with it the money that enables it. Moreover, the rejection of money serves a few important purposes.

First, it avoids the job of having to arbitrarily assign value to everything in the world. How exactly can you objectively decide how many hours of babysitting are needed to earn a cheeseburger, or how much grass to cut to earn emotional support from a friend? Capitalism pretends everything has a value in dollars, but that “value” is constantly changing based on what people are willing to pay in different situations and under different contexts. It leads to people trying to convince others that a thing is valuable, not of making something valuable inherently. Some other systems try to institute a “time bank” system to replace dollars with hours of labor, or use hours of labor as a minimum threshold for access to goods and services. However, those systems are then forced to define which labor is worthwhile (and can therefore earn these time bank units of currency) and which is not.

Second, even if you could somehow magically assign a coherent value to things, you would have to ignore that value for plentiful goods due to the Axiom of Plenty. Paradoxically, this would punish people for working to make something plentiful. A farmer helping produce food for everyone would not be able to use that labor to afford anything limited. Why would a society punish people for that kind of success? Don’t we want a world where things are plentiful?

Third, and most interestingly, making everything free fundamentally changes people’s relationship with their work. In our current society, work is a constant grind. Since we need work to survive, there’s an ever-present threat of starvation if we don’t keep doing it. Even “dream jobs,” ones that pay well and are something you are passionate about, are utterly draining when you can never rest from them²⁴. When everything is free, people can do what they love without the constant fear that they’ll be destitute if it doesn’t go well or they take a break.

Critique: Making things free can only be done in a post-scarcity society, and we are far from such a society

This critique is a very common response from even people receptive to Contributionism. There’s an underlying assumption, present in much of our Utopian literature, that things can only be free if they are infinite. If things aren’t infinite, then demand will inevitably expand to meet and exceed the finite supply. In that case, how can we determine who gets access to that limited resource? Isn’t the answer money?

There are a number of points to address here.

First, things don’t need to be infinite in order for supply to exceed demand. There’s a common assumption that demand is elastic, and can scale upwards indefinitely. That simply isn’t true. Rich people don’t eat hundreds of times more than poor people even with thousands of times the wealth, there’s only so much a person can put into their body at a time. Similarly, there are so many TVs you could fit in your house, and so many houses you can occupy. Demand is simply not infinite, so supply need not be infinite either.

Second, there’s an assumption that the law of Supply and Demand is like a law of physics. Supply goes up, prices go down, demand goes up, prices go up. However, it isn’t even

²⁴ [The dream job is dead. Now what?](#)

true in Capitalism. Companies routinely find ways to justify raising prices to consumers, from creating artificial scarcity even with digital products²⁵ to passing forward increased production costs and still increasing profit margins²⁶ to the tried and true model of monopolizing the market to fix prices²⁷. So this “law” can’t really be used to predict how a Contributionist society would work, let alone how our current society does.

Third, money is a bad way to distribute scarce resources. For example, consider malaria. Despite malaria disproportionately impacting the poorest people in a country, malaria treatments and preventative equipment disproportionately go to the wealthiest²⁸. Why? Well, those treatments and preventative measures cost money, and so communities with more money can afford more of them. The problem, of course, is that wealthier communities generally have better healthcare. Money is causing limited supplies to go to the people who least need them.

Taken all of these points together, what should we conclude? Since we don’t need infinite resources to meet everyone’s demand, the goal is to just make enough. No magic required. Meanwhile, the “law” of supply and demand isn’t anything external, it’s just a model (and an inaccurate one at that) that we humans invented. We can choose not to follow it and just set prices to zero.

As for how to actually deal with scarcity, money is not the answer here. By the Axiom of Directness, if a resource is scarce, then the solution comes in three stages. First, triage the distribution of what resource we have, the same way medical care is triaged to meet urgent needs first. Second, find an alternative resource that can be good enough to meet people’s short-term needs. Third, and finally, find ways to increase the supply however possible to meet people’s long-term needs. Trying to use an indirect method (giving people money and allocating scarce resources based on who is willing to pay) does not and will not solve anything. It is just an excuse for people to profit off of the desperation of others.

Critique: If a person doesn’t need to do anything to earn things, then they will be inclined to freeload and the system will collapse

This critique recognizes that, to make something truly free, there can’t be any obligation that needs to be met in order to obtain it. It’s not just that the price is zero, but there can’t be any work requirements or time banks or anything else that compels someone to work. Otherwise there would be a cost, even if not an explicit monetary one. Some people, in that situation, will choose to do nothing and just consume. If enough people do that, then no society will be sustainable. So why not add some requirements to ensure people will contribute?

The primary thing to address here is that people, if everything were free, would just become freeloaders. Is this true?

²⁵ [Artificial Scarcity: Creating Demand With Smart Positioning](#)

²⁶ [Investors watch U.S. companies' record profit margins as costs rise further](#)

²⁷ [America Has A Monopoly Problem](#)

²⁸ [Do Malaria Control Interventions Reach the Poor? A View through the Equity Lens](#)

There aren't a lot of studies directly examining how people spend their time when they don't have to work. However, there are ongoing studies on a Universal Basic Income, which is essentially a small amount of no-strings-attached money given to people. The effects of a UBI, though not proven, are certainly encouraging. UBIs tend to reduce poverty, increase education, increase health outcomes, and either keep employment the same or slightly increase it²⁹. In cases where people do quit their job, they tend to spend their time caregiving instead, which is just another way of saying they take on a different job (one that isn't considered a job under Capitalism).

That effect on employment is the key thing here. When given a UBI, people don't simply decrease their labor in proportion to how much money they make. While some do increase their consumption, the reason is mainly because UBI experiments are often done among poorer populations, who spend more on necessities because they can finally afford to.

More anecdotally, many people have moved to working from home, rather than an office, during the pandemic. Employers have feared that doing so would allow workers to be lazier, as they wouldn't be under the constant eye of their managers. It turns out that the opposite has happened. Workers are more engaged in their workplace, not less, and are suffering from burnout as a result³⁰.

These results, while not conclusive, have easy explanations if you remember the Axiom of Humanity. People are social animals, and they want to feel useful and needed by others. There's already a well-established trend that offering unlimited paid time off tends to decrease the amount of vacation time people take, not increase³¹. Moreover, when people have their needs met, it gives them the foundation and energy to be more useful to others. The cases where people become "deadbeats" are ones where they are struggling with depression or other forms of mental illness or trauma. They aren't the default state of humanity.

Even given all this, it is unreasonable to expect 100% of people to be actively working at all times in a Contributionist Society. Whether it is natural human variance, illness or disability, or even just a lack of work that needs to be done, there will be some people who won't be able to contribute to making products. Sometimes people just need a break from expectation. The key to note is that such circumstances would be rare. It's also important to note that people can contribute to society without making things. Being friends, providing emotional support, and simply being there to talk and play with others are all ways to contribute and make everyone's life a little better. We don't need to buy into Capitalist propaganda that a paycheck is the only indicator of social value.

Critique: How can anybody have the right to another person's labor?

This critique is less a pragmatic one and more of a philosophical one. How can anyone say that one person has the right to someone else's labor? Why should we believe that people who don't work deserve anything from anyone else? Surely it is the more philosophically moral

²⁹ [What We Know About Universal Basic Income. A Cross-Syntheses of Reviews](#)

³⁰ [The Wellbeing-Engagement Paradox of 2020](#)

³¹ [4 Lessons About Unlimited Vacation](#)

position to say that nobody is owed anything for free, and so it is perfectly suitable to expect something in return for the fruits of your labor.

One point to reiterate here is that, under Contributionism, nobody is forced to contribute anything. If you don't want someone to benefit from your labor, you don't have to. However, that may not be satisfying, since Contribution does *expect* people to work for the benefit of others, even if it doesn't *require* it. Similarly, while Contributionism doesn't forbid people from being paid for their labor, it does not condone doing so.

Another point is that, in a Contributionist world, "repayment" is rather pointless. After all, whether or not you are repaid for your work, you have free access to everything and anything you want. Demanding repayment, at best, would get you the thing you wanted a little sooner than you might have otherwise. This assumes that the person you are doing labor for is able to provide you with something you want, which won't always be true.

If there's nothing forcing you to provide your labor, and repayment would be pointless, then why might someone still feel like their labor should be repaid anyway? One strong possibility is that we can't help but judge a system in comparison to our current one. In our world, it's not just that you can be paid for your labor. It's that, if your labor *isn't* paid for, it is actively hurting you. You cannot afford necessities if you aren't paid for your work.

Under Contributionism, there is no such harm.

The real question, then, is not why someone has the right to free labor from someone else. The real question is why someone should want their labor to be repaid. It makes sense when life itself has a cost you need to pay, and just doesn't when living is free.

Ownership serves only to improve your life

Ownership, as a concept, tends to serve two important, related purposes.

First, ownership is a way to guarantee access to something. It's nice to know that, whenever you need a shovel, you can always use the one you've bought even if the stores are sold out at the moment. This can be crucial for emergency equipment, like first aid, epi-pens, or even fever medication.

Second, ownership is a way to deny access to other people. If you own a car, someone else can't legally take your keys and claim it as their own. Same thing with moving into a house you own, eating food from your pantry, or taking your computer. It can be nice to say that something is yours, and that only people you give explicit permission to are allowed to use it.

Both of these aspects of ownership are genuinely good things, and make peoples' lives better. However, both aspects also have downsides. People can hoard things they'll never use, denying access to others that need them. Vacant houses, owned by investors that will never step foot in them, lay dormant so they can be sold for a profit later. Restaurants claim ownership of their own garbage to make sure nobody has access to their food for free, even food they can't sell. Meanwhile, people die on the streets of starvation and exposure.

Under Contributionism, the only reason for ownership to exist would be to make people's lives better. Enforcement of ownership has to be a service provided by other people in the community (just like in our current society). The goal would be to define ownership in a way that also adheres to the Axiom of Plenty, in that it does not prevent or limit access to plentiful goods.

Critique: There is no clear line between keeping something for the future and hoarding, or between use and sentimentality. Thus, there's no good way to define ownership this way.

This critique picks at the difficulty of judging whether or not someone is owning something in "the right way." At least under Capitalism, if you bought it, you own it. What if someone goes to a vacation home once a year, is that enough use to keep squatters out? What if that home was built by a family member and had sentimental value, would it be possible to maintain ownership within a family? What if someone is stockpiling food for an emergency, how much are they allowed to store before it becomes "hoarding?"

It's difficult to give a satisfactory answer to this critique, because in a sense it is correct. There is a lot of gray area in determining use vs hoarding, and there really isn't a hard and fast rule to use for determining the difference. Without such a rule, it's easy to worry that something you find precious and sentimental, but is not something you necessarily "use" on a regular basis, would be taken from you with no recourse.

One way of getting at an answer would be to ask what the purpose of "reclaiming" something from someone would be. There are two interwoven answers. First, to give to someone in need. Second, to prevent the person from using their ownership as leverage against other people. Both have to do with scarcity, and how to distribute resources that are scarce. Thus, the problem of hoarding is actually a problem of scarcity.

If an item isn't scarce, then ownership doesn't even matter. People can keep whatever they want, regardless of how they use it, and nobody would be worse off for it.

If an item *is* scarce, but nobody needs that item to live, then there's no particular reason to dispute a person's ownership over it. True, other people may want it, but no one person is above any other under Contributionism. There will probably be alternatives.

If an item is scarce, and both the current owner and someone else needs it to live, then the current owner takes priority. Again, no person is above any other. The rest of society should work to find an alternative to meet the needs of others.

If an item is scarce, and the current owner doesn't need it to live, and others do, then it might make sense to reclaim that item to meet other people's needs. Obviously people should ask first and try to persuade the owner to relinquish the item first, but taking it by force is always a last resort. The same reasoning applies if the item isn't technically scarce, but is made scarce by a person's claim of ownership over it.

It's important to point out how narrow that last category really is. Nobody is going to forcibly reclaim your favorite pen, your figurine collection, or your phone. Even if such things are scarce at some point, they aren't necessary for survival. Similarly, nobody will be stealing the food off your plate or the water from your well. The overall food supply is so large that it would be impossible for anyone to make it scarce merely by eating too much of it themselves. It's only when people hoard necessary goods at a huge scale, as in warehouses and grain silos or entire neighborhoods of houses, that it might make sense to reclaim those goods for the sake of others. At that scale, it becomes far less fuzzy whether a person is really using the things they own or not.

Work is only for the benefit of people

In our current society, we have a complicated relationship with work. There's a centuries-old idea that work, simply for work's sake, helps make a person more virtuous. Not working, therefore, is associated with immorality and bad character. Funny enough, though, an even older idea states that work makes us less virtuous, as it distracts us from our civic duties and our efforts to educate ourselves³². There's not much solid evidence either way (especially since correlations between poverty and criminality are much more likely about criminalizing poverty itself). However, the idea that work for its own sake can detract from our ability to do good in other aspects of life is a compelling one.

Under Contributionism, work is purely a means to an end. Whether you work for others, work for yourself, or have others work for you so you can rest, the only end goal is that people's lives are improved. It is, in fact, crucial to understand that "not working" is just as valuable as "working" for a person's well-being. Obviously, work also must not be compelled (by the "consensual" aspect of the central tenet), and should be done without cost or repayment.

As long as these criteria are met, and as long as everyone in a community has equal power to enter, leave, and shape the way work is done (obeying the Axiom of Equality), there are all sorts of systems that could exist under Contributionism. Some labor might work best as individuals pitching in when they can, ad-hoc. Some might benefit from people taking on the role of managers and leaders to direct a large group's work towards a common goal. In all cases, though, everyone involved or affected by work would have some say in how it is done, and there would be no person considered "above" or "below" any other.

Critique: Without any sort of price, there is no way to understand if limited resources are being used efficiently

This critique is also known as the Economic Calculation Problem, or ECP. It proposes that, in order to "efficiently" make use of limited resources, there must be some sort of price that can act as a signal for what people want and what people should produce. Without this price signal, producers would have no way of understanding what products customers find more important, and therefore could easily use up limited raw materials to overproduce products that

³² [One of history's greatest philosophers thought work makes you a worse person](#)

people don't want. For example, shoe-makers and jacket-makers both use leather, but without price they could not know if customers would prefer having shoes over coats.

It's important to note that the ECP is intended to be an argument against central planning economies, specifically³³. More specifically, the "price" talked about in the ECP is free market pricing, in opposition to centrally assigned pricing. Therefore, the ECP as originally stated is not designed to critique a system without prices entirely. The spirit of the ECP, though, that price as a reflection of consumer demand is necessary for efficient production, is worth addressing.

The first thing to ask is what the ECP means by "efficient." From a contributionist perspective, the only definition of "efficient" that matters is "meeting consumer needs." In this case, the ECP falls to the Axiom of Directness in trying to use price as a stand-in for need. Needy people are often poor, and being poor means you don't have money. If you don't have money, you can't pay a high price. Thus, prices are driven by people with the means to afford them, not by need.

This isn't just a cute argument, it has real life consequences. For example, the US postal service delivers mail to remote and rural areas, regardless of profit. This is because private mail companies don't, because it isn't profitable³⁴. People in rural areas still need mail services, especially for medication, they just don't have the money or numbers to make enough profit. There are similar problems with trying to distribute medical and infrastructural resources to poorer countries, like the COVID vaccine³⁵. Those resources go to the people who can afford them, and who (because of their wealth) are less in need of them.

Meanwhile, in a Contributionist society, meeting peoples' needs directly (without price as an intermediary) is the whole point. Producers get a sense of the demand directly from people expressing a need for their product. This could be done in person, or through technology. There's no reason to think that consumers can't express their preferences for certain products over others, either. The producers make requests from the suppliers of the raw materials, who can use information from the producers to decide who to supply. None of this requires price or any central planning, and modern technology can easily overcome communication and data-management hurdles.

The nice thing is that, producer or consumer, everyone simply has a need that another person aims to fill. Regardless of the infrastructure, the central tenet still holds.

People work together, not against each other

Our current economic system is intentionally built on competition. The idea is that, if people compete against each other to produce cheaper, higher-quality products, then products overall will get better and cheaper over time. Moreover, if a company's existence depends solely

³³ [Economic calculation problem](#)

³⁴ [If the US Postal Service fails, rural America will suffer the most](#)

³⁵ [Why low income countries are so short on COVID vaccines. Hint: It's not boosters](#)

on how many customers it can keep, then the companies that fail to produce cheaper, higher-quality products will go out of business, leaving only the best remaining.

That's the hope, anyways. In practice, real world markets often fail to live up to this ideal. Like many other issues, the problem here is the Axiom of Directness. The biggest problem is that we equate "customers paying for a product" with "product is better and cheaper." Unfortunately, all it really means is that companies will produce whatever products they can convince people to buy while maximizing their own profits. Companies can try to make a superior product, but they can also sink money into advertising to convince people it is good, or monopolize a market so people don't have a choice, or undersell smaller competition for a time until the competition goes under, or any other variety of methods to get people to buy other than making something inherently better.

The real kicker is that people don't need incentive to make things better. What they need is time to experiment, and the stability to take risks. In a Contributionist society, people's basic needs are always met, so people can always take the time to experiment with new ideas. Since people's ability to live isn't dependent on them being able to capitalize on their ideas, those ideas can be freely shared and iterated on.

It's unfortunate, because "competition" in and of itself isn't necessarily harmful. There are whole communities built around cooperative competition. One example is the speed-running community, which generally tries to complete video games as fast as possible. Despite there being a leaderboard, people don't try to keep their techniques secret. Individuals receive community recognition for making discoveries, others do the same for being able to execute them in an attempt. Nobody has their life and livelihood dependent on achieving a fast time.

Contributionism doesn't forbid competition, it merely stops injecting competition where it doesn't belong.

Critique: If people cooperated with each other, they wouldn't be as driven to improve things. Competition makes people perform better.

This critique brings up one of the core reasons for why market competition has been so universally adopted. Regardless of whether real world markets live up to the ideal, it holds that the system still works better overall than if people weren't competing. No system is perfect, but ours at least gives us the results we want.

So, does competition produce better outcomes than cooperation? Actually, the reverse is true³⁶! Based on longitudinal studies of companies over the past few decades, it turns out that companies that cooperate with their competitors end up doing better than average. There was even a term coined in the 1990s for this: "coopetition." It turns out that, while cooperating with your rivals does mean it's harder to keep trade secrets, you get more in return from sharing better business structuring and cost-saving tricks.

³⁶ [Is Cooperation with Competitors a Good Idea? An Example in Practice](#)

To be fair, “coopetition” still includes elements of competition. We don’t have direct evidence of companies that fully cooperate with each other but don’t end up merging into one corporate entity. Still, it shows that even in our “free market competition” world, more cooperation is better than less.

People should primarily be allowed to live the way they wish

By the central tenet, the point of society is to help make other people’s lives better. Who better to know what would make someone’s life better than the person themselves? Sure, perhaps there are some edge cases where an external group genuinely knows better, but in general people can tell you what would make them happy. Society should listen.

Under Contributionism, there is basically no justification for forcing people to adhere to a single social norm, family structure, governing structure, or religious belief. Even if there was a particular lifestyle that was proven to provide better outcomes in one particular way, that only matters if the person wants those outcomes more than things they get from other lifestyles. There’s no room in Contributionism for trying to show that one lifestyle provides marginal benefits over another, declaring that first lifestyle superior, then trying to force everyone to take part in it.

The only justification for forcing someone to live differently than they wish is if doing so helps meet other people’s needs. For example, there is justification to interfere with a parent abusing their children or a person harming their spouse or friends. Even if they are doing what they think is right, if there is demonstrable evidence that their behavior is making things worse for everyone else, there’s justification to stop them. The harm must be iron-clad and demonstrable, though. It’s unfortunately common for people to claim that some group they don’t like is causing harm by their various existence, without real evidence, just to force that group to conform to the people’s own belief system.

Critique: How can you draw the line between conflicting needs? For example, an anti-gay person’s “need” to live without visible gay people vs a gay person’s need to avoid being harassed?

This critique is about how society can settle conflicts between people that seem irreconcilable. Contributionism doesn’t try to rank needs or wants as more important than each other, so what happens when two groups of people each claim to have needs that the other group must fulfill? A person who is anti-gay believes gay people do real harm in society and needs them to stop being gay, while a gay person believes anti-gay people are doing harm in society and need them to stop harassing others. How do you decide which side should prevail?

The key here is thinking more deeply about the sides of a conflict, and what “needs” are in conflict. In this case, the anti-gay person is trying to change how the gay person lives their life, while the gay person just needs the anti-gay person to stop attacking them. On the face of it, the anti-gay position goes against Contributionism’s central tenet. The gay person doesn’t

need the anti-gay person to stop harboring anti-gay sentiment, just to stop turning that sentiment into violent action.

It's worth noting that people are quite creative, in general, and are good at looking at a system and finding ways to subvert it for their own ends. The anti-gay person would look at this answer and claim that being gay is actually harming others (namely children), preventing them from meeting their own needs, and thus should be stopped. And that is an argument that is worth taking seriously in general! The problem is that this harm needs to be demonstrable, not just claimed, and thus far the research indicates there is no harm gay couples have on children simply by existing. The famous debunked study that claimed gay couples were less able to raise children than straight ones actually just showed that single parent households were worse than two-parent households, regardless of orientation³⁷.

There is no easy way to settle conflicts like this. People will take any simple metric and find edge cases or exploits. The rest of society needs to be equally creative, as well as empathetic, in order to settle conflicts in a way that overall makes life better for everyone.

Education is primarily student-led where possible

Contributionism has an innate focus on satisfying the needs and wants of others, rather than imposing your own desires onto others. This applies to education just as much as anything else. If someone wants to learn something, teachers can work to facilitate that learning. This is true regardless of age or educational goals.

There is one very important exception to this approach. A person cannot know if a subject will be interesting or necessary if they don't know a little bit about it. This is certainly true of small children, who don't have the life experience (or brain development) to be able to understand why a subject might be useful to know. Even adults can't know what they like if they don't know it exists, though.

Thus, a Contributionist model of education has two main goals. To introduce a student to a wide variety of subjects, and to help them explore subjects they find interesting more deeply. Teachers serve as moderators and guides more so than leaders and directors. Students, meanwhile, collaborate with each other in the classroom rather than competing for grades, and choose which topics to explore more deeply.

This brings up one last important topic. Grades are ubiquitous in education, but as was shown before, grades and other such rewards are actually detrimental to learning and curiosity. Instead, students and teachers work together to set goals, and teachers provide feedback for how students are doing in relation to those goals. This allows students to express their own interests and exercise some amount of control, while also allowing teachers to include goals students may not think about but that are known to be useful.

³⁷ [Suspect 'Science'](#)

Critique: How can people prove what they've learned to others in a system without grades? Can degrees even be meaningful?

This critique is about one of the potential benefits of a more centralized and standardized education system. The point of fixed course loads is that you can get a degree at the end, which is proof that you've learned a certain amount of material. This can be especially important for medical or engineering professions, since a mistake or a lack of knowledge can easily lead to lost lives. How could you have this useful proof-of-knowledge in a more free-form and self-directed school system?

The first point to make is that of incentives. One of the big incentives to obtain a fake degree is to get a well-paid job that requires a degree. One of the big incentives to supply a fake degree is to get people to pay you money for one. These incentives don't exist under Contributionism, and so the number of people supplying and making use of false credentials should be lower.

The second point to make is that we do have systems to try to verify credentials. Licensing, standardized testing, and accreditation groups all fall under the same idea: have some trustworthy people examine others and hold them to a certain standard. Similar institutions could still exist under Contributionism. There are some problems that can't be solved in a clean way (how do you verify the verifiers), but these problems would exist under any system. They are people problems, not system problems.

In a more free-form education system, "degrees" probably wouldn't be quite as useful since courses wouldn't be standardized. For some professions, it might make sense to use standardized exams (like the BAR exam). For others, it might be better to have a period of residency or apprenticeship under someone more experienced (like for doctors, nurses, and electricians). For others, it might be better to have individual groups try to measure skills during an interview process (like with programming). Whichever mechanism is used, all are methods of assessing someone's current abilities after education, not a proof of having gone through a specific educational process. And aren't a person's current abilities more important?

Justice systems must treat, halt, and prevent harm

Justice systems serve a few main purposes, all centered around harm. First is to heal harm already done. Second is to stop harm currently in progress. Third is to reduce or prevent future harm. Any society needs some sort of justice system, since there are all sorts of ways (intentional or not) people can harm each other.

Contributionism naturally lends itself to all three aspects of a justice system.

Healing harm is just about providing for a need that results from previous harm. If someone breaks another person's window, people can work to provide a new one. If one person injures another, they have a need for medical care that a doctor can provide. This much is natural under Contributionism, and luckily none of it requires the perpetrator's cooperation.

Stopping harm currently in progress is equally straightforward. A person can contribute to society by training to handle certain emergencies, and by being ready to do so when needed. This could be anything from CPR training to carrying a firearm. As long as people have a clear understanding for what they should do in an emergency, and as long as the community provides structure for what sorts of intervention are necessary and when, this can be rather ad-hoc.

As for reducing and preventing future harm, the primary aim here must be rehabilitation. Recall that deterrence through severe punishment isn't effective. Instead, it is better to increase people's perception that, if they commit a crime, they'll be caught. A whole community full of people ready and able to intervene should help with that. Once someone is caught, the goal should be to figure out why they did it and to address that cause. As with everything else, these are things that people with the relevant backgrounds and training can contribute.

You might wonder about a victim's need for retribution, to see their aggressor suffer in proportion to the harm they caused. Should a justice system provide this as well? Contributionism doesn't specifically rule it out. However, there are some complications. For one, the aggressor's needs must also be considered. If someone murders another due to a psychotic episode, the best thing to do would be to provide mental care and medication, not to execute them. For another, it turns out that victims of crimes themselves would mostly prefer aggressors to face long-lasting accountability through rehabilitation and treatment, not through increased punishment³⁸. Retribution can feel good in the moment, but it only really affects the person who hurt you. Rehabilitation promises to stop other people in a similar position from hurting others.

It also helps to remember that, in a Contributionist society, there aren't a whole lot of options to inflict punishment. Monetary fines aren't possible, and confiscating property would be more of an inconvenience than a lasting harm. All that's really possible is prison time, physical torture or execution, or maybe exile or denial of some resource. While prison time may be helpful to separate someone from people they would want to hurt for a time, the others wouldn't really help preventing future harm on a broad scale.

³⁸ [What do victims want from criminal justice reform?](#)

How might Contributionism work?

There are many different ways a Contributionist society could operate. If Contributionism were to become the way all societies on earth worked, it would no doubt operate differently in different places. As long as the core requirements are met and all of the axioms and the central tenet are respected, people would be able to organize themselves in local ways according to how they wish.

One thing you may notice is that this section heavily references existing societal structures, often as things that can be used practically unchanged in a Contributionist society. This is good news in a couple ways. One, moving to a contributionist society does not require completely upending everything we know about how to organize ourselves. Two, it turns out that humanity has made a lot of progress towards understanding what organizations work and don't despite the Capitalist pressures we all have to deal with. Even if some societal structures lose meaning under Contributionism, others can be iterated and improved upon rather than needing to start from scratch.

Group decision-making via direct democracy

There are a couple conflicting desires with group decision-making. On the one hand, you want everyone to consent to an outcome. On the other hand, you need to be able to make decisions in a large group where it is basically impossible to get everyone to agree. Thus, you'd want a system that can reach decisions while not permitting small groups of people to take advantage of others.

One possibility is a two-step form of approval voting. For each possible choice, each person in the group decides to approve, disapprove, or remain neutral to it. These options are tallied up. In the first step, the choice with the most approvals wins as long as that number is above a certain threshold. If no choice succeeds, then the choice with the most combined approvals and neutral votes wins, again as long as that total is above a certain threshold. If no choice wins, then the decision is considered too close to call.

The intent of the first step is to simply pick the option that most people actively approve of. The intent of the second step is to pick the option that the fewest people actively disapprove of. As for the threshold, that is calculated based on the total number of votes and modeling the voters as voting randomly in a binomial distribution with a probability of $\frac{1}{3}$. The threshold would therefore be (mean + 2 std dev). This ensures a 95% probability that the outcome is different from people voting randomly, with the goal to make sure the decision actually reflects the wishes of the group.

In practice, this would require unanimous consent (in other words, no disapproval) on a choice for groups up to 6 people. This means that, in small groups, everyone (or almost everyone) needs to agree on a decision and no simple majority can choose for everyone. In a group of 100, that threshold would be 60, with larger groups having a threshold closer and

closer to a simple majority. This means that large groups can still make a decision even when many people don't agree, while still ensuring that the decision isn't particularly close.

The only tricky aspect of this process is calculation of the threshold. That can be done once all the votes have been collected and tallied, and there's a simple formula to do so. That calculation can also be skipped for small groups, since basically everyone should agree. It benefits from approval voting as a system, where you aren't penalized for showing approval for options other than your favorite, and the neutral option allows you to give some extra weight to your favorites. It is also scalable, since votes can be tallied in a decentralized way and then combined, and the tallying process is straightforward. If multiple choices are possible, the group can simply go with all choices that meet or exceed the threshold.

Question: What if a large majority decides to oppress a minority?

There are some societal woes that are human problems rather than system problems. This is one of them. Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee that a large majority in a community will never be able to harm or oppress a minority. No matter the system, however power is distributed, there will be some scenario in which people will be able to trample on others by following the system or by subverting it in the right places.

This same answer applies to other forms of problematic group decisions, like a community deciding to put together a monarchy or some other hierarchy. If everyone in a community wants it, then there's no system that will stop them.

The good news is that Contributionism doesn't pretend that group decision-making is enforceable by some infallible power. It is a human system, owned and operated by humans. If some people want to use social pressure or violence to harm others, other people can use social pressure or violence in return to stop them. There would be no systematic justification for oppression, nor any resource-based incentive to do so.

Question: How do you prevent extreme ideologies from taking over?

The best way to answer this is to look at how extreme ideologies take power in the first place. The answer, like many things, is complex, and can differ from ideology to ideology³⁹. Some risk factors, like "Connections With Violent Extremists and Violent Extremist Material via the Internet and Social Media," can't really be addressed by an economic/political theory. So, in that sense, there is no 100% way to prevent extreme ideologies from taking power.

However, there are some factors, like "Grievances" and "Search for Meaning," that Contribution addresses directly. Working to directly improve people's lives helps reduce these sorts of negative experiences and feelings people have about their lives. Without those negative feelings, extreme ideologies have less fuel to blame on nefarious external groups.

Now, to be fair, there will probably always be cults, since some people will have a motivation to be seen as a god-like figure and exert power and control over others. However,

³⁹ [Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Canada, the U.K. and the U.S.](#)

there will certainly be far less of a reason to start cults without any money or limitations on resources. When you look at extremism driven by large media and political groups, you see that a huge factor in their perpetuation is money. Not everyone believes the ideas they espouse, but they certainly get paid well (and drive fundraising for causes they care more about) by doing so. Under Contributionism, that motive vanishes, and with it vanishes the motive for large, sustained propaganda involving many actors.

Everyone would still have to be diligent, and would have to inform each other on the ways in which extremism can be packaged. However, that's true of any human society.

Land is owned by its residents

Everyone in a community breathes the same air, drinks the same water, and enjoys the same nature. In a system where ownership is defined by use, everyone in a community can be considered to own that nature.

The most important thing to realize is that our current society is not a Contributionist one. In our current society, owning land means the ability to kick people out of it, and the ability to develop it the way you want with little regard to how your actions might affect the land outside of the part you personally own. In a Contributionist society, however, everyone who resides in an area shares ownership of it. Land ownership, therefore, is more about having decision-making power in how that land is used. If someone wants to build a factory that puts out pollution, everyone breathing that air or drinking that water would be able to decide as a group whether that should be allowed. All of this follows from the consensual nature of the central tenet.

Critique: What about the Tragedy of the Commons?

A famous critique of commonly-owned property, land in particular, is the Tragedy of the Commons. This idea is rooted in a thought experiment concerning a group of cattle owners who end up destroying commonly-used grazing land. According to the thought experiment, this happens because each cattle owner is incentivized to overuse the common land to increase their own profit but no individual is incentivized to keep the land healthy due to a lack of individual ownership. This thought experiment is extended to all commonly held property; everyone is incentivized to overuse the property and nobody is incentivized to maintain it.

The main rebuttal to this critique is that it is a thought experiment, unfounded in reality. It was never an account of a real community of ranchers. In fact, history is full of examples of communities making use of common land without it being destroyed. Real ranchers have historically used real common lands and have set up systems to ensure nobody overused the land and ruined it for everyone. Factually speaking, then, the idea is completely bunk and shouldn't be taken seriously.

The problem is that the idea still resonates with people. It feels true. A lot of us have the experience of lending or borrowing something and having it returned in worse condition. City infrastructure is crumbling with governments unwilling to do anything about it. Humanity as a

whole is slowly but surely destroying itself with human-driven climate change. Surely the Tragedy of the Commons must hold some truth, right?

No. The problem lies elsewhere.

By the Axiom of Humanity, on average, your neighbors are going to be treating your things with same (if not more) care than they treat their own. You notice the damage they do more because it's out of your control, but you are responsible for fixing it because you bought it. If you're already under financial stress, it's going to hurt. In a contributionist society, your ownership is based only on your use. If your neighbor borrows something and damages it, they own it and they would presumably be responsible for replacing it. Moreover, replacement won't cost anything except the time and effort to find that replacement.

City infrastructure is crumbling because cities operate on a limited budget and are run by politicians constantly forced to run for the next election. Politicians need constant, big wins to keep people excited and voting. Infrastructure is boring and invisible if done right. In a contributionist society, there is no limited budget: people can simply fix the things that need to be fixed without needing to also navigate how to pay for it. There's no need for any sort of centralized planning either, unless people find it useful, so there's no need to rely on planning by a person who is incentivized to only focus on new and exciting things.

As for climate change, the single biggest factor in humanity's resistance to preventing it is the economy. People worry the changes needed to save the world would be too costly in the short term, would disrupt production too much, and would be too invasive in people's lives. Wealthy people want to keep making profit, especially at the cost of a future they won't experience. In a Contributionist society, there is no profit to pursue, no economy to damage. There are no people who can sit at the top and force their companies to keep operating in a non-sustainable way. We know from history that, without this overwhelming need for profit, people can easily work out smart, sustainable solutions to large problems.

Finally, it's worth pointing out that the common form of the Tragedy of the Commons is about ranchers raising cattle on shared land for profit. They are motivated to overuse the commons because their financial well-being improves if they raise more cattle and doesn't reduce if the commons are destroyed. Now, this second part isn't actually true, but even if it were, Contributionism has no profit motivation. There is no incentive for ranchers to try to outcompete other ranchers by raising more cattle. Everyone's in it together.

Communities without borders

A country is, essentially, a large group of people under a shared government that occupies a particular area of land. Borders between countries are used to delineate who is subject to which government, which government can choose what to do with said land, and who makes the rules for who can cross those borders.

Under Contributionism, there is no real ability to form a centralized government unless everyone agrees to form one. Even then, that government doesn't really hold any more

enforcement power than the community itself does. Similarly, land is controlled by the people who reside in it, so there's no real means for a government to be said to "own" land except by virtue of its constituents owning land. As for borders, while communities could refuse to allow immigrants to settle in the land they occupy, that decision would have to be made in every local area across the country to replicate the notion of preventing immigration across a border.

Thus, there is no real means or motive to form central governments or enforce borders. People can travel freely, with free access to the means of transportation and to housing at their destination. While no community would be coerced to allowing immigrants to settle within them, the default would be to contribute to whatever those immigrants would need.

There may still be some use in drawing out the borders of particular communities on a map. After all, it could make sense to define communities around linked infrastructure (like roads and railways), or around groups that have decided to form some sort of more centralized governing body. Not to mention that giving names to communities helps people talk to each other about where they are located in the world and how they will be traveling. However, the borders of those communities would always be an approximation, and would not normally mean anything special in terms of how people can travel.

Question: What's to prevent a community from building a fence or wall around their bit of land and making a de-facto border?

Abstractly, nothing. If everyone that resides in an area agrees to contribute the land they own for space to build a wall, they can certainly make that choice. In practice, it would be very difficult to make that happen. Essentially, every time you create a border, there will be people residing on either side of that border. In our current society, only the people within the border need to be consulted for building a wall. In Contributionism, people on either side of the border would need to be consulted. This also includes anyone who hunts in the area, or anyone who walks through the area on hikes, or any other number of ways people might use land.

The point is that a Contributionist society requires the consent of everyone directly affected by a decision. If somehow everyone agrees to the wall, then there's no problem in building it. However, chances are low that that decision would be made, both at first and continually over time as the wall is used to keep people out or in.

Question: How do we deal with land stolen from colonized peoples?

Under a Contributionist society, many issues of disparity and historical oppression (poverty, healthcare, education) go away. Everyone gets what they need without cost, and nobody can usefully hoard wealth, land, or resources due to ownership being defined through use. Everyone naturally has an equal ability to determine how their communities operate. This alone would already address a great deal of injustice. It does not, however, address the problem of stolen land. After all, the people currently using the land (and who would own it under Contributionism) are the people whose ancestors originally stole it.

The only real way to address stolen land in a Contributionist society is to have colonized people make a decision about what land they wish to own, then work together to give them that land back. It's really the only thing that can be done, to give colonized people the choice that was taken away from them.

For the descendants of colonizers, this can feel scary. After all, doesn't this mean colonized people could kick out people (who personally played no role in colonization) from their homes? Yeah, that could happen. Remember the Axiom of Humanity, though. If descendants of the colonizers argue over the morality of treating a wrong with another wrong, so do the colonized. We're all humans, we all go through the same moral dilemmas and have the same capability of reasoning and empathy. Colonized people understand that the people of today are not the same people that committed historical atrocities. They can be trusted to make a reasonable decision. To say that they can't, but that descendants of colonizers can, is to continue to dehumanize colonized people.

Products available through shops, warehouses, and libraries

In any society, people will want and need things. Those things need to be made accessible to everyone in a community in some convenient form. Under Contributionism, there wouldn't necessarily be any such thing as a "business," due to the lack of profit and competition that drive businesses to form. Still, some of the infrastructure used to operate businesses would be useful even if the businesses themselves don't exist.

Shops are handy for consumable products or products that aren't easily shared, to organize them by type and display them in pleasant ways. These shops would look very similar to what we have today, except there would be no need for a cashier or check-out desk, nor for any distracting advertising or duplicitous stocking paradigms. Larger shops like grocery stores and malls would still exist to handle high-turnover products. All-in-one super-markets and mega-malls would be less common, though, since they are great for profit but terrible for accessibility in a community. It's better to keep things smaller and decentralized, so most people will have to travel less far to get what they need.

Warehouses, likewise, would still operate largely the way they do now. They are perfect for distribution and keeping supplies available to more local shops. They wouldn't need to run a profit, though, which means warehouse workers would no longer be overworked and underpaid. We probably won't have as many next-day deliveries (unless people in the community are really interested in making it happen), but warehouse labor would be easier and less exploitative to obtain. In our current system, companies have stopped stockpiling supplies to reduce storage costs, opting for a just-in-time delivery system that works great until there's a hiccup in the pipeline. Making use of warehouses again means adding stability back into the supply chain.

Libraries are ideal for products that are used temporarily and then no longer needed. Obviously, our society is used to renting and returning physical copies of books, movies, and even music. However, there's no reason not to apply this same model to other products like hammers and nail guns and lawnmowers. Some people may want to keep these tools if they use them frequently, but others may just need a tool for a short term project. Why own such a

tool if you could just check it out of a library for a short time and return it when you're done? It would reduce the total number of such tools a community would need.

Question: Even if shops and libraries are functional, why would anyone put any effort into making them look nice? In a capitalistic society, there's at least a monetary reward for aesthetics.

People are attracted to things that look nice, so they'll tend to shop at places that look nice. In a Capitalistic society, this means higher profit. In a Contributionist society, this means higher participation. The key thing to note here is that when someone is interested in setting up a Contributionist shop, they're doing so because they want people to use that shop. If nobody uses the shop, the owners are putting in a lot of effort without benefiting anyone. This is all the incentive that's needed.

Not to mention that shop owners would, at the very least, be using the shop themselves when restocking things or sitting in the shop to help customers find things. If they don't want to make the shop look pleasing for others, they'd likely at least want to make it more pleasant for themselves. We already know that people will actively pay money to make their homes look nice, so there's no reason to believe people wouldn't do the same for other places.

Question: What about variety? Why set up multiple shops with the same products if there's no profit incentive

Variety is something people like to have, which means providing it is a way to contribute!

Less flippantly, there are plenty of incentives for variety besides profit. For restaurants, it's easy to imagine different shops specializing in different cuisines that may require negotiating different supply lines or follow different recipes. The same thing applies to other products as well, like different types of pens or styles of clothing. It can just be easier for a shop owner to focus their efforts on a narrow type of product, leaving room for others to provide different styles.

Even if you consider two shops selling the exact same product, it's important for accessibility to have multiple locations. Additionally, if a shop regularly gets a lot of traffic at particular times of day, it might not be able to meet the demand on its own even if it has access to enough supplies. A second location would spread the work around and make things easier.

Question: What about the Right to Destroy?

The core idea of Contributionism is about people providing for other people. "Ownership" exists only to serve that core idea. Sometimes that does mean that you are providing people with a product that they destroy, intentionally or not. Destruction can absolutely be something a person needs or wants, and there are obviously plenty of products whose core purpose is to break or be consumed. Even products meant to last eventually wear out through use.

It's hard to conceive of this as a "right," though. Specifically, while a person could easily choose to destroy the things they own, it's hard to say that other people would be compelled to

continue providing that person with things to destroy. The Axiom of Plenty specifies that access shouldn't be limited to plentiful resources except to ensure access to others. Large, systematic acts of destruction absolutely do remove access to the destroyed things, and therefore can and should be limited.

There's also a question of who is responsible for replacing broken items. In our current system, the common line is "you break it, you buy it." Basically, if you destroy someone else's property, you should be the one to replace it so they aren't financially responsible for your actions. In a Contributionist system, replacement is just another way for a person to contribute. Ideally it'd be done by the person who finds it easiest. It is unfortunately a little unrealistic to expect the person breaking something to always be the one to replace it.

Markets of need

Even in a society with decentralized labor, it can still be helpful to have some more centralized infrastructure. Such infrastructure can help people find other people to provide for beyond their local community and friend groups. It can also help people discover goods and services they may not have known to even look for. Thus, a Contributionist society may have a variety of different opt-in markets to organize labor.

What does it mean to have a "market" under Contributionism, when there is no actual official endorsement of trade? At base, it is some system that can connect people who need something with people who can provide for that need. This could be a physical location where people set up stalls to offer goods and services, or a website or app that could connect people electronically. This allows people to reach beyond their local friend group or community to find the things they need or want, and for people to offer their skills to others even when nobody needs them locally.

This form of market provides an extremely useful service beyond just connecting people. It offers a way for people to understand how much of a demand there is for particular services. After all, you can directly see how many people want a particular thing. If there is more demand than supply, people can work to meet that demand. If there is more supply than demand, suppliers can ease off and work on other things. There's no need for any single person to be in control of the system, and everyone can still voluntarily decide how they want to contribute and what they want to request.

Question: Isn't a system of supply and demand just Capitalism?

No. Technically speaking, Capitalism is mainly about ownership of "capital," or property that can be used to bring in wealth. Think of ownership of a factory that produces goods, or a house that can be rented out. Contributionism doesn't allow ownership of things you aren't personally using. The workers in the factory would be its owners, as would the family living in the house. Even if someone did own something considered "capital" under today's system, there is no way to convert that ownership into wealth. Everything in society is available for free, after all, so there is no trade to enable concentration of wealth.

It is a market, though, and Capitalism also makes use of markets. So why wouldn't these markets suffer from the same problems as Capitalism's? Precisely because of that lack of price and profit motive. There's no incentive to form a monopoly, nor to sabotage your competitors. Everyone is working together to meet demand. Also, advertising would only be about informing people about what you can provide. There's no incentive for advertising to try to shape people's opinions towards that which would be most profitable.

In short, the self-organizing nature of a market is useful, and the exploitation that exists in our current society's markets can be avoided by removing the incentive for exploitation.

Question: Who would be in charge of these markets?

No individual person or group needs to be in charge of everything. A website or app needs to be created and maintained, so programmers can contribute to those things, rotating in and out as they wish. Physical markets need a place to set up, materials for stalls, and advertising and scheduling to determine who's stall goes where and what days the market is open. Again, people can offer to help organize these physical markets, and different people can be responsible for different days and in different locations. The people organizing might even just be the people in the market itself.

There's an important bit of nuance here. In our current, hierarchical society, "being in charge" means making decisions from a place of power. Managers are "above" the workers they manage, being considered to have a more important (and less replaceable) role and being rewarded with a higher salary. All of that goes against Contributionism. However, "managing" is a very useful way for people to contribute. It isn't a job "above" others, but alongside.

It's also important to emphasize that the whole point of the market is to consensually contribute to peoples' lives. This has to mean that the people driving the markets are the people whose needs are being met. There's an idea in the disability justices sphere of "leadership by the most impacted." Who best to explain what their needs are then the people with those needs? A Contributionist market cannot survive on people guessing what others need or imposing their views of what is needed on others.

When asking about who would be in charge of Contributionist markets, some people might really be worried about singular groups making all the decisions forever, and thus being targets for bribery and corruption. There can be people in charge, if the community wants, but it's just another piece of labor. There's no implication that the same people are always in charge or that the same people are in charge of everything.

Question: How could people know to ask for something in a market if that product doesn't exist yet?

Nothing about a market precludes people from just making things they think other people will like on their own. This is most assuredly not a central planning system where the group needs to meet a quota based on demand and do nothing else. The same thing applies if you think you can meet people's needs in some other way than they are asking. If you know what

people are asking for, though, then that gives you information on what sorts of problems people are facing and what sorts of things you could do that would be most beneficial.

Question: How do you deal with negative externalities?

The real question is, how can negative externalities continue in a Contributionist world? Take a look at the incentives. The only ones that really exist are that some people want a product while others are being hurt by its production. Under Contributionism, there is no “them” vs “us,” everyone is on the same team. There is no profit motive, or constant need to achieve endless growth and market domination.

Maybe a more interesting question is, “who deals with negative externalities?” Supply chains under Contributionism consist of groups of people supplying each other with the materials they need to be able to produce things people need and want. One group in the chain would be the first to realize that their actions are causing environmental or community harm, so they stop. Others who needed those raw materials would then need to find an alternative. However, there’s no expectation that you must produce things in order to benefit from Contributionist society, so if no good alternative exists then a valid option would be to stop production all together. That group can then communicate their reasons for doing so up the chain, so people come to understand how a product’s production is harmful.

Additionally, because Contributionism isn’t about selling things, reversing the harm done by a product is another completely valid way to contribute to others. There’s no reason not to, unlike now where a community may be too poor to pay for fixing the damage done by others. There will always be ways in which we fail each other and hurt each other in unforeseeable ways. At least under Contributionism, there’s more motivation to help make up for that harm than to cause it in the first place.

Innovation through collaboration

Even in our current world, scientists nominally operate outside of economic incentives. There’s a huge drive to keep scientific research available to everyone, and to validate and build on each other’s ideas. Still, even with this intention, science can’t help but be subject to Capitalistic forces. Plenty of “scientific” papers are just industry propaganda in disguise, put out to muddy the waters of consensus and provide just enough cover for companies to profit off of harmful products. Plenty of others are well intentioned, but were only chosen for funding because of the subject area or the conclusions they reached.

In a Contributionist society, the profit incentive is gone. With it goes the need to keep industry secrets. Instead, all aspects of innovation can work like how science is supposed to function. People interested in improving something can work together to share ideas, critique each other’s work, and build off of each other’s findings. They may not necessarily communicate in research paper style, but similar sorts of organizations and infrastructure can work.

One point to make here is that a Contributionist society has no need or desire for patents or intellectual property protections. It’s always important to make sure people are credited for

their work, but there's no point in a patent whose only real use is to bar other people from making use of an idea. Additionally, a Contributionist society couldn't ethically keep industry secrets due to the Axiom of Plenty, as ideas can be shared infinitely.

Question: Why innovate if someone else could just claim they came up with it, or came up with some slightly different version?

The simple answer is, to contribute to other people's lives and to the greater body of human knowledge. Fame and fortune really aren't the point of anything under Contributionism.

The more complicated answer is that it genuinely is important to credit the right people with their work. It's something even scientific institutions have failed to do, to the detriment of historically oppressed people. Another historical issue has been to associate great discoveries with single, heroic people rather than the reality of large groups slowly building on each other's work. Both issues need careful consideration to solve, perhaps through better citation methods and listing all contributors as authors rather than the few leaders of a lab. Patents, or other forms of intellectual property protection, are not solutions. In fact, they tend to put single names on great ideas, often to those who can get the patent rather than those who make the discovery.

Thus, it is important to credit the right people with innovation. However, it's important to credit *everybody* and not just individual figureheads.

Projects instead of careers

Under Contributionism, there's no real need for a "steady job." You don't need a salary to survive or thrive, and there's certainly no pressure to do the same labor over and over for a stable income. So what would your day-to-day life look like?

Most of your day looks the same. Clean up after yourself, take care of your loved ones, go to stores to pick up food and supplies. As you want to, you can pursue a hobby, education, social activities, and leisure. Instead of a 40 hour work week, you can take on projects to help contribute to others.

Projects are just a name for limited-time ways you can contribute to others. Anything that you might do in your job today could be broken down into projects. You can stay on a project as long as you like, swap out with someone else if you need, or abandon it if you don't like how it is going. The point is not to dictate some structure, but to recognize that labor in a Contributionist society is generally ad-hoc to meet the community's current needs. That's not to say that people can't work long-term on projects (like maintaining a computer system) or stay in the same field (like specializing as an electrician), just that such things aren't required or incentivised over variety. Do whatever helps people and whatever you can be excited about. Or just whatever you find easy enough.

Plenty of work requires training to be able to do well. The good news is that anyone in a Contributionist society can have access to the training and education necessary to gain those skills. Medical and law schools won't be more expensive than any other vocational school, so

there can naturally be more people able to do that work. This means each individual person can do less work overall, meaning less burnout, fewer career-related injuries, and fewer workplace accidents caused by exhaustion or overwork.

Question: Shouldn't people be encouraged to specialize, since specialization is more efficient?

Specialization is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, you can get very good at a particular task by doing it over and over. On the other hand, you don't allow yourself to gain skills in other areas by sticking to just one. Participatory Economics⁴⁰, an alternative economic system that aims to distribute the role of Boss across workers, makes an important point about specialization. A workplace that tries to move beyond a Capitalist framework, but keeps the same Capitalist structures of bosses and workers, will inevitably sink back into the same problematic hierarchical classes.

Why?

It's not because there is an unavoidable class difference in the people, but because of the differences in their jobs. If one small group constantly coordinates a larger group, they develop leadership skills the others don't. They also have a more active understanding of the current state of the business. This leads them to view their own jobs, and themselves, as superior. This can happen even if both groups start off with equal skills.

Thus, while people should surely be allowed to stick to the same sorts of projects if they want, it is far more important to allow and encourage people to change things up every so often. Let the people on the assembly line spend a few weeks there and a few weeks in the planning room. This gives people a better understanding of how and why the work needs to be done, empowers people with skills and information to make decisions, and prevents some people from being stuck in boring and stifling labor.

Question: What about the things nobody in a community wants to do?

Sometimes you might be able to ask people outside a community to travel to do it. Otherwise, people have a natural tendency to build up momentum to do necessary work. The longer people are aware of a project, the more likely people will eventually decide to just get it over with so they can stop worrying about it. The larger the community, the more likely it is you'll be able to find people to take on a project sooner rather than later. Plus, nobody needs to worry about losing profit by taking on a project that pays less than their current work, since of course there is no profit to be gained.

Unfortunately, Capitalism's answer to this question is "keep a group of people poor and deprived so that they are desperate to do anything to survive." This is the unfortunate reality behind the idea that Capitalism "requires" poverty. Plus, when people are desperate for a job and will accept substandard pay for it, the employers have more power to depress wages.

⁴⁰ [Participatory Economics: Introduction](#)

Question: What about the people who don't want to contribute?

Let them not contribute! In fact, contribute to their lives such that they can continue to not contribute for as long as they need. Remember the Axiom of Humanity: people have internal reasons for doing the things they do, and in general people want to do right by others. If someone is “freeloading” off of society, there’s a reason for it. You can be confident that, in the vast majority of cases, giving people the space to not contribute with no expectation will allow them to work through whatever it is they need to.

Remember that there may be all sorts of reasons why someone may be unintentionally unable to contribute. Maybe the things they are skilled in are things that aren’t currently needed. Maybe they have some physical or mental needs that restrict what they can do.

Also remember that a system can be made less efficient by tying up resources in monitoring people to make sure they pull their weight. Often it can be better to just let people slack off, and direct the energy that would have been used for monitoring elsewhere.

How would we create a Contributionist society?

Assuming a group of people mostly agreed with Contributionism as a system, and understood how such a system could be implemented, the next step would be to figure out how to make it a reality. This section attempts to lay out a timeline for how such a transition could be done. The suggestions here are focused on the United States, but something similar may be workable for other areas of the world.

Step 1: Gather Support in a Community

Transition to a Contributionist society simply can't happen in small, isolated groups. The biggest reason why has to do with the Contributionist rejection of money. It's trivial for a group of people to offer goods and services to each other without requiring payment. However, anything the group can't provide for itself must be purchased from outside the group. The smaller the group, the more things that must be purchased from outside the group. Thus, the first step is to gather support for a Contributionist society beyond small, local groups.

Probably the single best thing to do at this stage is to take part in local town halls and community meetings. Approach it from a Contributionist mindset. What do your fellow community members need and want? What can you do to work together to make that happen? Really listen to what people are saying, and be curious about why. Even if that's all you do, your community would still benefit from you taking a more participatory role in how your community functions, and you gain a better insight into your neighbors' needs.

The standard paradigm for town hall meetings tends to be an audience of community members asking questions of and making comments to a few elected officials. It can tend to feel like each person is making an individual plea of the person in power. If you feel comfortable doing so, you can try challenging this paradigm by asking questions of the community instead. It's a paradigm shift that puts the power in the hands of the whole community rather than just a few people. The community can talk over a subject amongst themselves, turning to the elected official for information on implementation. Even if that's all you do, it can redefine how people relate to their representatives, and get people used to the idea that representatives don't have to be considered "above" them.

If people are enjoying this new style of community governance, then it might be interesting (at an appropriate time) to talk about Contributionism and the ideas that underlie it. If people have already gotten used to the idea of making group decisions together oriented around helping people and making their lives better, it's not a far reach to consider a whole society built around that approach. If people are used to figuring out how to help first, then considering things like cost as merely a hurdle to overcome to make it happen, they might be more receptive to imagining a system that doesn't have money at all.

Once a community comes around to the idea that Contributionism might be a good idea to operate under, then comes time to start working out a transition.

Step 2: Set up an optional communal bank account

With enough support, a community can simply stop requiring money for transactions that happen within that community. No need to uproot or create any new infrastructure, no need to change the way stores or restaurants operate (at first), no need to even take money away from anybody! If Contributionism succeeds, that money simply becomes unnecessary.

Before this happens, though, the community needs to figure out how to maintain connections to the outside world. Basically no communities these days are fully self-sufficient. Thus, for a variety of reasons, there will be money (and goods and services) flowing into and out of them. If a community decides to stop assigning a cost to things, products from the rest of the world will still require money and local people may no longer have a salary to afford them.

Thus, the second step would be to set up an optional, communal bank account. Anybody in the community may access the funds in this account as long as they agree to contribute any income they receive to it. This would be true even if that income is zero. There would be no requirement to give up any of your own pre-existing wealth, and only bare-minimum restrictions on how the funds in the account may be used. Perhaps the only real restriction might be to put some oversight on suitably large transactions, just to make sure no individual tries to empty out the whole account at once.

The purpose of this account is simply to make it appear as if a community is still operating under a capitalistic system from the outside while not requiring an all-or-nothing approach to a transition. It needs at least some funding, hence why people must contribute any income to it (and any taxes to external governments can be paid from it). However, anyone who takes part is left no worse off than when they started since they do not need to contribute any existing wealth they may have. If some unforeseen problem happens, the remaining funds in the account can be easily redistributed to everyone in the community before it is dissolved.

Question: How much money would be needed to start in the communal fund?

Almost impossible to say. One estimate could be to take the cost of living in an area per year and multiply it by the number of people in poverty. This would be an estimate for a healthy amount of money that won't deplete too quickly, taking into account that some people wouldn't want to stay in exploitative jobs and that others would need to be newly supported without an existing income.

There are a ton of variables that would impact the true value needed. Anything produced within the community's borders could be done at zero cost once prices are eliminated and thus wouldn't need to be drawn from the communal account. Any goods that would normally be imported into the area to be sold at profit would be cheaper (since there would be no profit), so the effective cost of living under Contributionism could be cheaper. On the other hand, people would likely try to take the opportunity to pay off debt, which would take a chunk out of the

communal account. People would also be interested in purchasing goods that aren't usually covered under cost of living.

An interesting question is about rent and home purchases. How would they impact the communal account? Chances are good that property-owners would be uninterested in renting or selling their properties for free. Those properties are generally intended to be an investment, purchased years ago with the expectation that they would collect equity over time. Thus, even though these goods are fully inside a community, they likely wouldn't be able to be eliminated as costs. Other common necessities, like food and fuel, would more likely be able to be "sold" without a profit markup.

This startup money might come from residents, or from wealthy benefactors, or even a federal or state government. Regardless, it has to be crystal clear that there is absolutely no promise of a return on investment. This money is not a source of profit, it is a necessary evil to experiment with a new way of living. If that experiment fails, the money is gone. It will, however, have been used to improve people's lives, if only temporarily.

And if that experiment succeeds? Well, then lost money wouldn't really matter anymore.

Question: How do we deal with people who use communal funds inefficiently, like buying a product that is available for free?

If people are finding that they can't meet their needs or wants within the community, they may choose to spend money to meet those needs externally. All that means is that the community isn't actually meeting that person's needs. Remember that products in a Contributionist society only exist to meet people's needs. If someone's needs aren't being met, people should be curious about why. It is not viable to mandate how people spend the communal funds, even though the intention is noble.

Honestly, though, it would be untenable for every community to need to be self-sufficient in a Contributionist world. Just like it would be untenable for every individual to need to put more into the system than they take out. There will always be some places that take in more than they produce and vice versa, and those places will change depending on which products and services you choose to look at. The communal funds are not intended to be self-sufficient either; they only exist to allow a community to follow Contributionism within its borders while the rest of the world is still Capitalist. The goal isn't to be profitable, the goal is to reject profitability in favor of improving people's lives and solving the problems that are unprofitable to solve.

Question: What if the communal funds run out?

The experiment ends. It simply wouldn't be worthwhile to try to extend the experiment by running everyone into massive debt. Everyone loses the income they had been putting in, but they keep their original savings so nothing else is lost. It is essential that, if the worst happens, people are able to keep the things they own (like housing). Ideally, people can do the math at how low the communal account is running, and can give everyone a long heads up when it looks like things won't be sustainable for long enough.

It is vitally important that this worst-case scenario is not a disaster. Contributionism is about providing stability, after all, and that stability is precisely what enables people to be generous with themselves and to avoid the instinct to hoard. People need to know that there is a safe off-ramp for the transition. If there isn't one, if people are required to gamble, then that will give people reasons to cheat each other.

Step 3: Eliminate Prices Within the Community

Once a system is in place to make sure people can still interact with the rest of the world, the next step is to make all things within the community free. There's no need to even change the way supply chains are set up, nor the way businesses operate. Society remains exactly the same as before, except there is no bill at the end of a transaction.

At this step, any businesses operating within the borders of the community would have two choices.

First, they can choose to continue operating as usual. They will have paid employees offering services for profit, and community members can access those services by paying out of the community bank account. This helps guarantee access to useful services and goods even if the owners of the business are skeptical of the ability of a Contributionist society to operate.

Second, they may convert any existing locations within the community into a non-profit. Their employees become volunteers working without a salary, their products become available free of charge, and that location gains access to the community bank account for external expenses. This allows businesses to buy in, even if only partly, to the idea of Contributionism without needing to shoulder the financial strain of doing so. Plus, all of the employees (workers and managers alike) automatically qualify for access to the account due to their zero salary.

The elimination of prices may seem like a dramatic early step, but it is probably the easiest meaningful one to take. It does not change the day-to-day operation of the economy, not even for businesses who still want to make a profit and are skeptical about worker motivation in a world without money. It does not require any new organizations, construction, or form of governance to pull off. It doesn't require any real legal changes, since the law can't really forbid people from giving away things for free. Importantly, this elimination is also voluntary, since people can continue to operate under Capitalism if they desire. They may face increasing social pressure from community members not to, but they won't face legal repercussions.

Question: How long should a community aim to eliminate prices for?

Hard to say, but probably a couple months at the bare minimum. Ideally a year. Any shorter, and the whole experiment will feel more like a Black-Friday-esque sale than a true attempt at a different form of society. Shorter time periods also mean fewer paychecks contributed to the shared account to help fund things. The longer the experiment, the less FOMO people will feel about taking advantage of the free prices *right now*. That will put overall less pressure on businesses making their products available for free, making the whole thing more sustainable.

There will be some amount of increase in consumption at the beginning of the experiment no matter how long it lasts. People have all sorts of debts and deficits they are struggling through, be it debt or food insecurity or a lack of essentials. It would be ideal for businesses to plan to overproduce for the first week or two in preparation for this initial rush. That rush might be delayed a few days as people might not believe the experiment is actually happening or might be waiting for it to be called off, but it will happen and will be difficult to go through. Any supplies that start running out will induce more demand for it, just like at the beginning of the COVID pandemic.

The only real solution here is to stay the course through this initial time period while maintaining clear and consistent communication of when products will be available and how the production and supply lines are fairing. There may be some cases where products need to be rationed, but that rationing should be avoided wherever possible. One of the big fears of alternatives to Capitalism, after all, is that everything will be scarce and over-rationed. That fear needs to be assuaged through good communication.

Question: What about people outside the community who travel to it to take advantage of the free prices?

Let them.

The main issue with outsiders is that they are taking products out of the community without paying in. However, this can be somewhat offset by the fact that Contributionist businesses will have reduced waste due to not needing to throw out products they can't sell for a profit. Plus, people who travel in for some free products may still spend money at other still-Capitalist businesses in the area. Finally, outsiders coming in to see how Contributionism operates can be some great PR. Some portion of them will go back to their homes wondering if their community could work the same way, if only to get free stuff without the need for travel.

You might wonder if the community could just limit the free products to those who have already bought in. Maybe issue some sort of community ID card. The thing about these sorts of systems is that they introduce overhead: making the IDs, maintaining a registry of who has them, installing some means of counterfeit detection, creating validation devices, giving those validation devices to businesses, validating said IDs in every business, requiring an attendant in each shop to scan said IDs, and so on. That overhead can likely be more costly than just letting people get away with free stuff.

To answer the underlying question more directly, yes, there can and will be outsiders who take more from the system than they give. Contributionism isn't about maintaining a balance sheet, it's about making peoples' lives better. If that means a community supports more than just themselves, so be it. Always remember the Axiom of Humanity; people are internally reasonable, and want to do right by each other. There will be some people trying to take advantage of the system, but likely they would be doing so because they are already facing hardship. If we can alleviate that hardship, and show people that a better way is possible, it's worth being a little economically inefficient.

Step 4: Find a new equilibrium

At this point, the true work begins. Poverty is no longer an issue in the community, with food, housing, transit, and especially medical care becoming available to everyone who previously couldn't afford it. Insurance is no longer necessary since people won't be overburdened by expenses in case of an emergency. Businesses who buy into Contributionism no longer have to care solely about maximizing profits, ending many of the practices that make them so terrible to work for. People can finally go about contributing to the lives of others without worrying that their favorite means of doing so wouldn't be financially viable, and they can take the time they need to truly recover from a lifetime of overwork.

The first year or so of this step will likely be the most volatile and the most critical.

People who have been forced into soul-destroying jobs will likely quit as soon as possible, and they may not even seek a new job for a while. Whole industries within the community dedicated primarily to money (payday loans, banks and mortgage companies, investment and hedge funds, financial planners), will collapse or move elsewhere. People will draw much more heavily from the communal account than they put in, mostly to settle student loans and other sorts of debt.

Unfortunately, this first year is also the thing critics of Contributionism will use as their primary argument that such a system is unworkable. They will point to the increases in unemployment as a sign that people are lazy, rather than recovering. They will claim that various businesses that leave the community are fleeing the sinking ship rather than just worrying more about profits than people. They will point to the ever-diminishing communal account as proof that a moneyless system can't make money.

Therefore, the single most important thing the community can do during this time is simply be there for each other. If big businesses leave, banking on the transition failing, create new ones in their place. If part of the community is struggling, do your best to support them. Recognize that everyone, rich and poor, government and private sector, of any race and creed is just another person in the community. Use the fact that you don't need to make a profit to your advantage, doing things that may not make money but do make people feel happy and stable. If you can show, during that first year, that a non-capitalistic system is both safe and effective, you will do more to unseat capitalism globally than any written work could ever hope to do.

After the first year comes the slow and steady work to transition the structure of society away from money. Remove parking meters, eliminate treasuries, focus new construction on providing for the things people need rather than satisfying wealthy buyers or overseas investors, rebuild broken-down infrastructure now that labor and supplies are free, rescind laws around taxes, eliminate policing aimed mainly to raise money off of poor people, reorganize shops and businesses around meeting demand rather than generating profit. All of this can happen over time, as people become comfortable with the new system and don't fear that it all may come crashing down at any moment.

Step 5: Reconsider societal structures

By this point, the community will have had time and experience with Contributionism layered on top of old Capitalist structures. There is a stable baseline people know will at least be workable, if not ideal. Therefore, the next step would be to consider these old structures and how they might be reconstructed. From the way homes and businesses are located in relation to each other to the different types of work society performs, all of these things can be reconsidered to better improve people's lives rather than increasing people's profits.

As an example, businesses today choose locations based on how many high-paying customers would frequent them. This biases businesses towards affluent and densely populated areas, areas which paradoxically have less overall need for their services. Without a profit motive, businesses might choose to relocate to areas that are underserved instead. Unlike with gentrification, this would not displace the people living in those underserved areas since there is no rising cost that would drive them away.

As another business example, plenty of businesses operate in ways to undercut their competitors. Large chains try to squeeze out local businesses that might take away from their market share, and big super stores try to be one-stop-shops for everything you might need so people spend all of their money at that same store. Without a need for competition, these large centralized businesses no longer have a reason to exist. This is especially true considering that large centralized stores, depending on their location, tend to require cars to get to and thus become less accessible to people who don't have a car (and/or can't afford one).

Some other examples include hostile architecture built only to keep homeless people out of sight, huge skyscrapers built primarily to be rare and expensive investments for the wealthy, large sectioned off pieces of land owned by individuals for farming or for mere ownership, products designed to only last so long so there would be a constant need to buy new versions, and even stores that try to make their most profitable items most accessible and appealing. All of these things have no real reason to exist in a society without money and can be discarded in favor of things that serve people's needs.

Step 6: Reorganize government into decentralized groups

As people reconsider relatively small-scale structures and institutions, they can start to rethink broader societal organizations. Many public programs oriented towards providing mere financial support would no longer need to exist. The people in government positions can start offering their skills as project managers and organizers towards more decentralized projects. People can start discussing new means of voting and group-decision-making, and can take a closer look at the scars that centuries of Capitalism have left behind.

At this point, if not before, it also becomes critical for the community to start examining how it can address global issues like Climate Change. Without a need to worry about the monetary cost, communities can work on transitioning to green energy, reducing greenhouse

gas emissions, and building support systems for dealing with the damage that has already been done. Without a profit motive, there will be much less incentive to oppose these efforts.

Step 7: Lead larger-scale change by example

Hopefully, by this point, the outside world will have seen that Contributionism is a perfectly workable system. More importantly, it will have seen that Contributionism addresses the societal issues that capitalism has either created or left unsolved. Other communities will follow this one's example. Those that don't should be brought into a dialogue about why or why not. The key thing to realize here is that everyone, even those outside the Contributionist community, is a person with an ability to offer critiques of a system. The goal is to answer those critiques with real examples of a working system, and to discuss alternative ways in which other communities might operate, or even alternate ways this community might function.

At some point, as various communities move over to some form of Contributionism, there will be a point where money no longer holds enough power to be meaningful in the world. This is the true power of a moneyless revolution. Even the ability to purchase ads and push propaganda is diminished when others can do the same. Moreover, the only things the wealthy lose is the power of their wealth, they lose no property they are using nor any ability to obtain fancy things as long as people are willing to create them. They are put in no danger. Ideally, some day people will look back on this era of Capitalism with amusement that it was ever considered inevitable and regret that it took so long to reject.

Step 8: Abandon Capitalism and help each other

With this final step, Capitalism is done. There is no longer any incentive to make a profit, no longer any means to hoard wealth, and no longer any ability to convert wealth into power. If this hasn't happened earlier, everyone can finally leave behind the safeguards they kept just in case Contributionism ended up failing. The communal bank account can be discontinued, as well as the entire banking, lending, investment, and crypto industry. All of the space and computational resources can be reused for other purposes.

There are plenty of global challenges people will still need to face, and different groups of people will still have very different ideas about how to live their lives. Contributionism will not solve war or strife, though it will eliminate some of the incentives that drive it. There are historical injustices that will need to be righted, and people will need to relearn how to see each other as fellows in a community rather than strangers out to get them.

Why is Capitalism bad?

This is just a fun section to vent about certain aspects of Capitalist society, without necessarily tying it back to a specific alternative under Contributionism. These problems would be solved under Contributionism, of course, but it would do so via second and third order effects of other more concrete differences.

Capitalism is a pyramid scheme

It's taken as a given that, under capitalism, poverty is inevitable. The real question, though, is why. After all, can't a person with nothing just work hard, rise through the ranks, and eventually become wealthy? Of course they can, it does happen, but it's so rare that nobody can actually rely on it happening. Economic mobility is one of the greatest lies of the American dream, and it is pernicious because there are a few (and only a few) counter-examples.

First, what is a pyramid scheme? In short, it is a system where people are arranged in a pyramid-like structure, with few at the top and many at the bottom. Money flows from the bottom to the top, enriching the few at the expense of the many. Usually, the few at the top are the ones who set up the system in the first place. They convince other people to join with the promise that, if the pyramid grows large enough, they too will grow wealthy. The pyramid mathematically cannot grow large enough, though, so most end up losing more than they gain.

Under capitalism, owners of capital are able to use that capital to earn money, paid by the general populace, usually for some sort of product. To grow, they often hire people to work for them (and usually do the labor in its entirety), claiming most of the profit for themselves while paying out a salary or some other distribution to the workers. The capitalist is at the top of a pyramid of workers, literally.

But wait, workers don't pay their bosses, right? They don't, but the bosses decide how to distribute the profit. In essentially all cases, the bosses get a larger cut than any of their workers. Thus, for every dollar of profit coming into the company, more of it goes to the top than to the bottom. Of course, workers are promised that if they work hard, eventually they can rise through the ranks through promotions to become the bosses and get the larger cut. Just like with pyramid schemes, though, there are more people gunning for the top positions than there are positions, so only a few can actually achieve this goal. Just like with a pyramid scheme, the answer is to grow the company (the pyramid), increasing the workforce so that more high level positions are needed. The pyramid must grow for you to get rich, and it mathematically cannot grow forever.

Workers at the bottom don't lose money, they gain it. So Capitalism raises all boats, right? Not quite. Now, instead of a single company pyramid, we have to think about all of society arranged into such pyramids. Everything you could possibly want to buy is coming, at some point, from some sort of pyramid, ie a corporate hierarchy. Every dollar you spend, every dollar anyone spends, feeds into a system where most of that dollar goes to the few at the top.

Every dollar spent in a Capitalist society serves to increase inequality.

Now take into account the fact that companies raise prices when they feel like they can get away with it. All this means is that they raise prices to meet the spending power of those at the bottoms of the pyramid. Thus, even those at the bottom aren't losing money directly by working, the products they spend money on are increasing to meet their funds. Cost inflation, without a corresponding wage inflation, means people at the bottom are pulled ever closer to poverty. One financial hardship, and they are destitute.

What about investments?

Those would technically be a way for people to put themselves at the top of the pyramid, becoming the shareholders that companies are obliged to make profits for. Isn't investing something anyone can do?

Unfortunately, no. Investing is inherently risky. If it weren't, everyone would just invest since it would lead to a more reliable income. Moreover, people with more money can find ways to reduce that risk, while people with less money can't⁴¹. Or they could just set up systems to manage how poorer people invest so they benefit off of every trade⁴². Thus, investment is biased towards the capitalist, and is yet another way money flows up.

What about starting a new business?

Again, if everyone could do this, it'd mean everyone could be at the top of the pyramid. The whole metaphor would break down, since there would be no bottom.

However, larger businesses are more resilient to risk than smaller ones, and they have a greater ability to reach customers. In the big field of pyramids, the biggest ones disproportionately are able to capture profit, leading money to continue flowing up. Some people get lucky, just like in real pyramid schemes, since money flows up only on average and not in some carefully controlled way. Most don't get lucky.

Additionally, unless literally everyone owned a business and nobody was a worker, there would always be some people at the bottom. The only way to avoid this is if companies paid every position the exact same salary, evenly dividing the incoming dollars. Capitalists have no reason to do this, though. In their eyes, their ownership of capital entitles them to a larger cut of the incoming profit.

Don't rich people spend more?

They do, technically, but not by much. Wealthy people are able to put a big chunk of their income into investments, rather than being coerced to spend it all to meet basic needs. Now, this investment money technically filters back into other businesses, but it is a loan more than spending. They expect more money back (taking into account inflation) than they put in.

⁴¹ [How Redditors Exposed The Stock Market | The Problem With Jon Stewart](#)

⁴² [How People Cheat The Stock Market | The Problem With Jon Stewart Podcast](#)

Even if you ignore these details, though, it still is the case that every dollar rich people spend goes into another pyramid which disproportionately enriches the few over the many. In a sense, the Capitalist world is one where both poor and rich pay rich people to live. Inevitably, this leads to wealth concentrating into the hands of the few.

Can't taxes be used to balance this system?

It can, but only extremely aggressive taxation can do so. Remember, the core problem is that Capitalists gain a higher cut of every dollar than any individual worker working for them. To balance this out, taxes must take enough away from the Capitalist and give enough to the worker to evenly distribute that dollar. If taxes aren't that high, then they can only slow down inequality, not stop it and certainly not reverse it.

How aggressive would these taxes need to be? According to one average, US CEOs make 351 times that of their individual workers⁴³. Let's say a CEO has 999 other workers in a company that generates \$100M a year in net income. Mathematically, that would mean workers are earning about \$74K a year vs the CEO making \$26M. To fix this with taxes, the effective tax rate on the CEO would need to be around 99.61% while the workers would receive that taxed income directly. This would bring the CEOs net pay down to \$100K and bring everyone else's up to the same. Not even in the socialist's wildest dreams would such a tax rate have any hope of passing in today's world.

Profit destroys creativity

A common claim is that creativity and innovation can only happen under Capitalism. People who make this claim vaguely wave at history, saying that because this recent period of astounding technological advancement has happened in conjunction with Capitalist society, therefore Capitalism is the cause. Correlation is not causation, of course, but it's an argument that feels compelling due to the lack of a counter-example (a completely non-capitalistic society with a similar wild technological advancement).

We already know that rewards act as a damper for creativity. When you do an act for a reward, rather than the act itself, you are mostly interested in getting the reward. One example of how this can play out is with the movie industry. Large studios are remaking movies and reusing IP more frequently now than ever before⁴⁴. The reason is that these familiar movies have a known large audience, and are thus a safer source of profit. Now, part of the cause is also technology, as described by people in the industry⁴⁵, but even that is a problem based on profit. Because movies can't make profit in physical media due to streaming services, they have to perform incredibly in theaters. Thus, more experimental movies without guaranteed audiences just can't be made on a large scale.

⁴³ [CEO pay has skyrocketed 1.322% since 1978](#)

⁴⁴ [Are there really more movie sequels and remakes than there used to be?](#)

⁴⁵ [Matt Damon explains why they don't make movies like they used to](#)

Even in cases where large companies sponsor research, like with medical companies, the profit motive still poisons things. Since they can't guarantee research will always lead to something radical and profitable, they instead rely on patents and price hiking on the discoveries that they do make⁴⁶. These practices aren't just morally wrong, they actually have negative impacts on patient outcomes. Moreover, like with the movie industry, medical companies spend most of their money on marketing, then on developing insubstantial variations to existing drugs that are just different enough to be patentable but not different enough to perform differently. Only a tiny portion is spent on developing genuinely new drugs.

These facts lead to one conclusion. Innovation has happened in spite of the profit motive. Indie films exist because their writers and directors are passionate about them, not because they make millions. Scientists themselves are entirely about research and discovery. However, Indie filmmakers can't reach the quality of large studios, and scientists can't do research without funding.

Essentially, profit is not the cause of innovation. Instead, profit is an obstacle that people must overcome so they can innovate.

Without profit, why support someone else's large passion project?

There are many reasons people do the jobs they do. The need for money to live is certainly an inescapable one, but it isn't the only one. Movies need actors, light and camera technicians, makeup artists, set-builders, writers, editors, special effects artists, and many many others to fully come together. Not all of those jobs pay highly compared to the overall budget and profit the final movie makes⁴⁷. So why do people do those jobs if they don't become fabulously wealthy as a result?

Some might have passions of their own. Turning a dream into reality requires working out a ton of small details, which can be challenging and rewarding on its own. Some might do so in the hopes of gaining social standing alongside the innovator if the project succeeds. Some might simply be bored, and taking a small part in a large project might just be something to do.

This question actually highlights an important point. Most people on a big project don't actually share in the project's profits. People working on a large film may make salaries anywhere from 50k to 150k a year, but these don't even come close to the millions big-name actors, directors, and production company CEOs can earn. Because of this, it's hard to argue that people work on large projects only because of the money.

An even more extreme example is with video game companies. The industry is notorious for hiring a bunch of developers last-minute to hit a release deadline, only to fire most of them once the game is released⁴⁸. Worse still, companies use a game's credit listing against developers, and often refuse to credit those people they hired and fired⁴⁹. Given that credits are

⁴⁶ [Patients not patents: Drug research and development as a public enterprise](#)

⁴⁷ [How much everyone on a movie set gets paid — from the key grip to the director](#)

⁴⁸ [Why Game Developers Keep Getting Laid Off](#)

⁴⁹ [How Game Companies Use Credits To Reward. Or Punish. Developers](#)

one of the only ways for a games developer to show their past work, this practice can be extremely harmful to the developers and their careers. And yet, these developers still take part in the industry. Their love for their work keeps them going even in spite of these abuses. At least until they finally get burned out.

Patents considered harmful

Imagine you and a small group of other people find yourselves stranded on a desert island. You have very few supplies, so you all decide to go out searching for food. After a day of searching, you all meet back at your camp to share what you found. One person claims to have stumbled upon a hidden area of the island with a bounty of fruits and vegetables, and has brought back some samples to prove it. Great news, right?

Now imagine that they refuse to share the location of this hidden garden. Instead, they intend to trade their fruits and vegetables for things other people find or hunt. They claim that they can't just give the food away, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to personally benefit from their discovery. Moreover, if they had known they couldn't personally benefit, they wouldn't have bothered searching for food in the first place.

This seems silly, right?

For one, they absolutely benefit from having found food. They get to eat it along with everyone else. For another, they did start searching before there was any agreement on how they might be rewarded. Even so, the reward wasn't the point, it was to find food to avoid starvation until the group is rescued. Finally, and most crucially, it is strange that the only way they can be "rewarded" from their discovery is by preventing others from benefiting from it.

Welcome to the world of patents, corporate and trade secrets, and other similar forms of intellectual property protections. A concept that is nominally meant to incentivise and protect people ends up being used to deny access to people and exploit them.

The core argument in favor of patents is that it helps guarantee researchers can benefit from their research. Research takes work, and that work doesn't always pay off (or pays off infrequently). It makes sense to want to guarantee that, when research does result in something monetizable, that money will go to the person who did the research. Any work that doesn't ultimately pay off can't be done in a world where you need money to live, except by people who already have enough money to burn.

Unfortunately, patents are only an indirect solution. They aren't a guaranteed income in and of themselves, but a legal tool to assert ownership. An inventor can try to produce their own invention, but they need resources to be able to do so. Meanwhile, large companies can just fold the cost of patent infringement into their business model, and still make more money than they lose. An inventor can sell their patent, but often at a far lower price than it ends up being worth. The buyer will only buy the patent if they think they will make more money than it costs. Meanwhile, patent trolls will buy up patents just for the purpose of suing companies who end up inadvertently infringing them.

The Axiom of Directness is not the only problem with patents. When inventors are able to protect their patents and profit off them, it can be at the expense of consumers. Plenty of pharmaceutical patents are used to prevent other companies from producing cheaper alternatives, and customers don't really have an option not to buy life-saving medicine. Sure, this system guarantees profits to the patent holder (who isn't always the inventor), but it does so by preventing people from having easy access to it.

A direct solution may not be possible under capitalism. The nature of research is that it doesn't necessarily lead to anything, and research that does lead somewhere may not appear like it will. Research could be considered a public utility that people are paid a salary for, but there's no real way to tell who's doing "real" research and who's just going through the motions. The problem, of course, is the need for people to be "rewarded" for their work in the first place. Really, research needs to be about the discovery, not the money. Inventors throughout history have seen this and have refused to patent their inventions. Mostly to their detriment.

Price is not an indicator of value

Value, at heart, is sort of an abstract encapsulation of an "amount of utility" something provides. If something is very valuable to you, then it makes your life better in some way to have it. How this happens and why isn't really important, nor is it important to put an exact number to this utility. All that is important is that you can improve people's lives by making sure they end up with things they find valuable.

Capitalism makes one important, and genuinely true, observation about value. That is, you can end up creating more overall value than existed before merely through trade. If I have an apple, but am allergic to them, and you have a peanut butter sandwich, but hate peanut butter, then the overall value between us is low. If we trade, though, then both of us end up with something more valuable to us than what we had before. Between us, value has been created seemingly out of nothing.

Instead of an apple, you could imagine I instead have some currency. I then trade my currency for your peanut butter sandwich. This amount of currency is the price you've sold your sandwich for. Everything else, however, is the same. Presumably, I value the sandwich more than the currency, and you value the currency more than the sandwich. Whatever price we agree on has to be less than the value of the sandwich to me and more than the value of the sandwich to you. Ideally, possibly even the midpoint.

Thus, Capitalism argues that price is an indicator of value. If a good has high value, then I'll be willing to trade more currency in order to obtain it. If it has low value, then I'll be willing to trade less. Furthermore, since currency can be used to obtain just about any good, this should mean that prices are an indicator of value across different products. If something sells for twice as much, it must be twice as valuable.

The single biggest issue with this argument is that value fluctuates highly from context to context, but prices remain more stable.

To illustrate this, consider a sandwich shop. Generally speaking, shops offer sandwiches at a particular price to all customers. It doesn't matter if they are hungry (and thus value sandwiches more) or full (and thus value them less). You certainly couldn't try to convince a shop to sell their sandwich exactly at cost by telling them how little you need it.

This raises an important question, then. What is the value of a sandwich to a sandwich shop? The sandwich itself has some nonzero value, if only because the shop had to pay for the individual ingredients and for the labor to assemble them. However, the sandwiches themselves are pretty much worthless to the shop. After all, they have more sandwiches than a person could ever want to eat. Instead, the value of the sandwich lies in how much it can sell for.

Weirdly, then, price isn't an indicator of value. It *is* the value of a thing. A sandwich shop values sandwiches only via their ability to be bought and bring in a profit. It doesn't really matter how much the customer values the product, only how much money they can be convinced to pay for it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Here's why this matters. In the real world, companies have many options for raising prices besides making a better product. They can advertise their product to try to change how valuable people think it is. They can remove a buyer's choice, either by monopolizing a market or by dealing in necessary goods, so buyers basically have to pay whatever price the company sets. They can decrease the quality and cost of production while keeping the price the same to make higher margins. They can market to people who have more money, and therefore value currency less than someone who is poorer. They can market to more desperate people, who simply have fewer options to get what they need. If price were some genuine indicator of value, then none of these would be possible.

This is why Capitalism fails people. It doesn't actually address need, as in what buyers value, but what (monetary) value Capitalists can extract from people. Poor people, despite being hungry, can't be fed because they can't afford the food. Meanwhile, companies are incentivized to continue raising prices on sandwiches as long as enough people are willing to buy them, which leaves more and more poorer people unable to afford their product. It's why, for example, mosquito nets and malaria medication often ends up in wealthier communities. They may not need those things as much due to better health care, but they can pay.

If every trade results in both sides gaining value, then how can people be left poorer off afterwards?

The original concept of value as a measure of utility gained through trade is a lie, albeit a subtle one. The most important observation here is that "value" can be consumed. If a person eats a sandwich, they gain satiation and lose the sandwich. However, it doesn't take long before they become hungry again. This goes against the idea that "value" is something that simply accumulates with each trade, making everyone's lives better and better as time goes on.

It's more accurate to consider quality of life as its own metric. Trade, ideally, can increase the quality of two people's lives at the same time. However, it also decreases over time based on needs, changing interests, boredom, and so on. You can even assume that the

increase in quality of life from a sandwich is greater the hungrier you are, and still that boost will eventually erode.

Some things erode more quickly than others, though. People need to eat constantly to survive. Money can be used to buy food, but also buy other more durable pleasures. So what happens when a sandwich shop sells a sandwich to someone? The customer receives food, which can be necessary but is less durable. The shop will use some of it for food, certainly, but their goal is to do more than just break even. They want to make enough profit to afford other, more durable things. Thus, one side is getting something transient, while another is getting something longer lasting. The shop wins out over time.

This is why subscription services, as opposed to one-time purchases, are so insidious. Sure, companies like them because they are a more stable and regular source of income. However, they also turn more durable products into transient ones artificially. The customer is stuck paying for, say, photo-editing software the same way they pay for food, sinking money into a transient good that can be taken at any moment. The value they receive becomes far more temporary, which decreases the long-term value they receive from the transaction.

The customer could try to go without the product for as long as they can, but their quality of life will decrease until eventually their need (or desire) outweighs whatever cost a company sets. Long term, the company wins out.

How would getting rid of price help? Doesn't that just mean someone isn't getting anything valuable in return?

At face value, a seller that sells a product for nothing loses whatever value that product had for them, gaining nothing. Meanwhile, a customer gets the full value of the product without losing anything in trade. It is clear that the seller loses in this transaction.

However, they don't lose much. Remember that the sandwich shop doesn't value its sandwiches at all for themselves, but for the profit they can generate. The only real value lies in the cost of production. In an economy without prices or currency, the cost of production is essentially just the work to assemble. The ingredients, after all, are free.

Thus, while the sandwich shop does lose value with each transaction, they lose very little. The buyers, meanwhile, gain far more for not needing to lose any value in trade. Overall, then, there is still a net increase in quality of life. The owners and operators of the sandwich shop, meanwhile, get to be customers at other shops.

Still, it's hard to imagine people would be eager to lose out in one transaction when doing so isn't required to gain in others. It's not like Contributionism requires sandwich shop owners to sell a certain amount of sandwiches to earn the ability to buy other things.

The good news is that the sandwich shop doesn't actually lose out in the transaction. Humans are social creatures, and we gain value merely from interacting with and helping others. Even if the sandwich shop loses out on the sandwich, they still gain in terms of helping

other people eat lunch. Unfortunately, these good feelings aren't given a price under Capitalism, and thus they are considered to be valueless. That, like price as an indicator of value, is a lie.

Success can't be left alone

There's a common pattern across society. Someone does something brilliant; they write a compelling book, program an interesting game, lays out a persuasive philosophical theory, or leads a successful project. That work grows popular, and thus the creator grows popular alongside it. That person then gets invited to all sorts of conferences and talks to explain their work, and is wildly encouraged to produce more. Maybe their next work is equally brilliant, maybe more so, leading to more success, more acclaim, and more demand. Eventually, they run out of ideas, or put out a work that is less compelling, and society turns away from them. Maybe they keep on getting invited to talks or are hired for consulting jobs related to their original work, but they are considered to have "fallen" in some real way.

This is a huge problem, that success can't be left alone. We have this idea that if someone succeeds at one thing, they are inherently a successful sort of person, and therefore they should be given more and more important opportunities to exercise that success. The expectations build and build until they become too much, and the person ultimately fails.

Even more tragically, societal attention and opportunity are semi-limited resources. When one person goes viral for their work, they alone are sought after for important projects. This puts immense pressure on them while drowning out other talented people that could be equally successful, if not more so.

Capitalism expresses this problem in spades. "Successful" Capitalists are given more opportunities for investment and ownership, and more capability to do so via wealth. So many incredibly wealthy people become wealthy simply by virtue of being given opportunities others don't get. They can then use their accumulated wealth to take risks other people can't afford to take. All of this is in service of the idea that a wealthy person clearly has some innate capacity in them to achieve wealth through their own efforts, and should therefore be given more opportunity to express this innate capacity. As a result, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Meanwhile, the people with real skill need to both have that skill AND be lucky enough to find opportunities to use it. This is why social mobility is practically non-existent.

Why shouldn't successful people be allowed to keep succeeding? Isn't it a good thing to give opportunities to people who have been proven to be able to handle them?

Recall the Axiom of Equality. Namely, the scientific fact that people can't really be said to be innately superior to others. It turns out that success and knowledge in one area doesn't necessarily translate to others. A rocket scientist won't necessarily be capable of designing an efficient traffic system any more so than a so-called "average" layperson.

Additionally, opportunities change people. When you have the opportunity to work in an area, you learn how to operate in that area. Repeatedly giving opportunities to those who are already successful overworks those people while preventing others from gaining the skills to do so. Yes, having people learn on the job is slower than having someone who is already knowledgeable do it, but such things only really matter under Capitalism where everything must be as “efficient” as possible all the time.

This doesn't mean that successful people should be prevented from working in the field they found success in. That would be silly. What we do need to do is abandon the idea that successful people are successful because of some innate capability. The goal is to spread success around, not concentrate it into just a few individuals. Let people learn from other peoples' success, and keep opportunities open for people who are working on new projects that may become successful in the future.

Inflation is bad for most people and inevitable

Inflation can mean a few different things. It can refer to the tendency for the prices of products to rise over time, and also to a supply and demand curve for money itself.⁵⁰ Either way, it takes more currency to purchase the same goods. Anyone already struggling to make ends meet will find it harder the higher inflation gets. Economists will argue that inflation can be a good thing since it discourages saving and encourages spending and investing, but the benefits mainly fall to people who took out large fixed-rate loans before inflation hit.

To understand why inflation is inevitable, it's important to understand incentives. Companies want higher prices and lower wages to increase profit, while workers want lower prices and higher wages to increase their spending power. Economics would suggest that these incentives balance against each other, with workers no longer working for companies if the wages are too low and no longer buying if prices are too high. Meanwhile, companies will not hire if wages are too high and will not produce if prices are too low.

That's the theory, anyway. In practice, these incentives are not equal.

Ignoring relative bargaining power, companies will not engage in business if they cannot produce a profit. Doing so would be against the entire point of Capitalism, and even if they wanted to it would not be sustainable. So, in a sense, the cost of labor cannot rise higher than the price of goods would allow.

What about the inverse? Will workers accept jobs if the pay is too low to afford the high price of goods? Well, yes! Maybe not luxury goods, but certainly for food and housing, and those are the sorts of things inflation measures are usually based on. Workers will take on multiple full-time jobs to survive, even ones that don't pay living wages because there's no alternative. Welfare could help grant a safety net to workers, but that money needs to come out of taxes, and companies have the money to lobby to reduce those taxes because it reduces their overall profits.

⁵⁰ [When is inflation good for the economy?](#)

Thus, we have a situation where two competing incentives can't actually cancel each other out. Companies don't need to hire (and will look for cheap labor in other countries or automations to reduce expenses), but workers need to work. More fundamentally, rich people can live off their savings, but poor people need any money they can get now to survive. The result is what we've seen over history: wages stagnate, companies increase profit margins even during tough economic times, and inflation only ever seems to hurt the worst off. Prices can't rise indefinitely since then people won't be able to afford to buy anything, but companies can keep prices *just* high enough to be affordable while still sapping as much profit as possible.

So, who benefits from inflation? Technically, people who were able to borrow large amounts of money (with fixed rates) back when that money was more valuable. The people with higher credit scores that can qualify for those loans and pay them off. Rich people. However, inflation also provides great excuses for companies to raise prices on their products, even when the magnitude of those increases goes beyond covering increased cost of goods.⁵¹ This is considered good business, even something companies *must* do since, under Capitalism, companies must always grow.

In an economy without money, there is no profit margin and no wage. People never need to worry about not being able to afford goods, so they will not be forced to accept exploitative jobs. There could be no inflation. More importantly, there would no longer be this unbalanced mismatch of incentives. Companies would want to produce enough goods for people to make use of, but no more, and workers would want to labor just enough to produce those goods, but no more. Companies aren't compelled to grow forever, and workers' lives aren't at stake when companies need to downsize to match decreased demand.

Societal goods are gated by wealth

It's pretty safe to say that most people believe it is better to have a more educated population, even if there's some disagreement in what people should learn. Individually, a college education is meant to provide you with greater opportunities for higher paying jobs. Collectively, higher education enables a country to make greater discoveries, compete better with foreign countries economically, and enables people to make more informed decisions on political questions. All good things.

Given all of this, why on earth has college tuition grown so much faster than starting salaries for younger workers⁵²? All this means is that students are saddled with extraordinary amounts of debt, just for pursuing something that they are told will result in better lives for themselves and their families. College is supposed to break people out of the cycle of poverty, not further enmesh them into it.

Capitalism isn't about providing for the greater good. It's about making money. Of course, proponents of Capitalism will swear up and down that "making money" will, through secondary and tertiary effects, improve society, but it's a little hard to see how or why.

⁵¹ [Investors watch U.S. companies' record profit margins as costs rise further](#)

⁵² [The gap in college costs and young workers since 1980](#)

Institutions with money have power, and they are incentivized to use that power to ensure more money comes in. Schools increase tuition while trying to keep teacher salaries low (while forcing those same teachers to provide supplies for the classroom) because that's what makes the most money. It's hard to argue that those practices result in better outcomes for students.

This is a general pattern. Capitalism is about increasing profit. To increase profit, you need to increase revenues and decrease costs, with quality often requiring increasing costs. Capitalists will argue that increasing quality should increase sales, so therefore companies will be incentivized to increase quality, but instead companies are incentivized to market their product heavily or corner markets so customers have fewer choices. Decreasing costs and lowering quality ends up being more effective on a company's bottom line than increasing quality (and costs) to increase sales.

As a result, societal goods suffer. When companies do offer better goods, they do so at higher prices which only the wealthier can afford. Those wealthier people are often less in need of those societal goods, so those goods are distributed extremely inefficiently, in the sense of getting that good to the people who need it most.

What about specifically trying to provide "affordable" goods that are still decent quality? If the overall production costs aren't expensive, shouldn't this be a way to get things people need to the people that need them? Well, here we run into yet another quirk. If a good is cheap and of quality, then everyone will want it over the more expensive version. That drives the price of the good up, which defeats the whole point of making it affordable. The only way to avoid this is to make the quality worse as well, so people who can would choose to get the higher quality but more expensive version. All this means, though, is that poorer people are saddled with the goods that are bad enough that nobody else wants them. Think of housing located in industrial areas or near garbage dumps. We could absolutely provide better housing if we wanted, but then that housing would cost more by virtue of higher demand. Even if we could make enough housing for everyone (and we can), actually doing so would decrease the overall price of housing and make it less attractive for builders.

In a society where profit is no longer an incentive, institutions can instead focus on producing the best quality they can for everyone, without worrying about whether doing so would make their venture less profitable. For societal goods like housing and education, that means a direct focus on improving society instead of an indirect one. The people who are most in need of a societal good would be able to access it, and distribution of that good would be as efficient as it can be.

Opportunity cost poisons everything

Opportunity cost is a sort of hypothetical loss every choice has. It's defined as the net benefit of the best possible choice in any situation minus the value of the choice you did take. Under capitalism, you can even assign a monetary value to that loss! For example, if you work an hourly job for \$15 an hour, and you want to take 3 hours some afternoon to walk in the park, in a very real sense that walk will cost you \$45 since you could have been working.

There are a couple caveats here, like noting that not all hypothetical choices are actually possible. Your boss might not be able to schedule you for 3 hours that afternoon, for example, or maybe you'd have more energy to work if you take a break to go for a walk. Additionally, this opportunity cost doesn't actually subtract from the value of the choice you made. If your choice has a value of \$100, and the opportunity cost was \$100, you still made \$100. It's just that you could have made \$200.

With those out of the way, why does the idea of opportunity cost poison everything? There are three big reasons

First, it forces you to compare everything against the ideal, so at best you're only ever breaking even. It should be fairly clear why this is a toxic idea. Any joy you might derive from gaining something is sucked away once you realize you could have (and maybe should have) done better. Even if you do end up picking the monetarily optimal choice, at best you've avoided disaster. It is psychologically harmful to live a life of constant loss.

Second, the numerical value of opportunity cost can only take into account things given a monetary value. Would you pay \$45 for a walk in a public park? That money could help buy food or pay down a utility bill. Using it on something that should be free seems like a waste. How could a mere walk be worth so much? Well, there is no easy way to place a monetary value on mental and physical health, or on the stress associated with working for 3 hours at a \$15/hour job. A walk should be worth *something*, but instead it just has an opportunity cost. Same with other sources of joy, including vacations which have both an opportunity cost *and* an explicit cost. That activity won't be as enjoyable if you keep thinking about that loss.

Finally, a constant focus on opportunity cost gets in the way of positive impacts on other people. When you buy food for a starving person, you might get a sense of fulfillment at helping your fellow humans, but imagine if you invested that money instead? Instead of losing money, you could have gained it! Or imagine offering some vegetables from your farm to a family in need. You could have sold those vegetables, or preserved them for emergency food for an upcoming winter. It totally makes sense that you'd want to demand something in return for that food, even if it isn't money. Otherwise, you've only lost (despite the fact that the other person has gained).

The problem is that opportunity costs are a real thing. If you make choices in a controlled situation with and without considering opportunity cost (like in a game where you could make 300 gold over an hour with a fun activity or 10 gold a minute with a boring one), considering opportunity cost will put you ahead. It just does so at the expense of your self worth, joy, and generosity, all things not given a monetary value under Capitalism.

Can Contributionism avoid opportunity cost, then? Not entirely, unfortunately, because there will always be more and less effective choices by some metric. However, in a world where everything is free, opportunity cost doesn't actually hurt you. No matter your choices, you'll still be able to have enough food, shelter, and entertainment to live a fulfilling life, and there's no monetary value put on some things but not others to stress over.

Capitalism limits human nature

Are people inherently selfish? It sure seems that way. Wealthy people plot ways to increase their fortunes using workers as their tools, poor people resort to taking things they can't afford, and those in the middle are happy to step over those lesser off than them in their attempts to climb the ladder of society. Without a constant need to purchase things, people would never work, and society would collapse. You have to exploit this evolutionarily-ingrained selfishness to keep everything running. Right?

Well, yes and no. Yes, people do act selfishly in our society, but it's not because of human nature. It's Capitalism. When a system expects you to be selfish to get ahead, and expects you to get ahead to have power and freedom and other nice things you want, why be anything but selfish? By assuming people are selfish and creating a system to encourage it, the system causes people to become selfish.

So what are people, if not selfish? They are problem solvers. When the problem is survival, you find ways to get the resources you need, even illegal ways if legal ones aren't working. If the problem is social status, you look for ways to talk yourself up while keeping rivals down. If the problem is getting as big of a number as possible, you employ vast armies of workers that give you more than you give them to build your wealth faster than others. These actions are selfish, but they are also the best solutions available to you.

In a society where there is no wealth, where everything is free, basic survival is no longer a problem. You don't have to worry about food, shelter, and medical care. You don't have to stockpile wealth to solve a problem that's solved in a different way. Now the problems are helping others live their life, decreasing the difficulty of necessary work, and enjoying life. Generosity becomes the solution people reach for instead of selfishness.

Capitalism creates risk, then uses it to justify itself

One argument you hear quite a bit from proponents of Capitalism (and supporters of a monetary economy in general) is that "people who take risks deserve to be rewarded." This "risk" is meant to justify extreme levels of wealth inequality, as well as incredible amounts of money investors can gain simply by having enough money to do the investing. One could argue that this perception of risk wealthy people take is distorted (wealthy people maintain their wealth by being able to minimize risk), but there's something more fundamental going on here.

Why, exactly, should there be risk in the first place?

To start off, let's think about what risk even is. On one level, it's the basic idea that you can put time, energy, and money into a project and have that project go bust. When it does, you've lost that time, energy and money. This sort of risk is a natural sort, something that doesn't require any artificial human constructs to exist. If you chop down a bunch of trees to build a bridge, and that bridge collapses, you end up losing a large percentage of the wood used to build that bridge. It splinters, breaks, gets waterlogged, and becomes less useful.

However, if that was all risk was, then it'd be hard to use it to justify absurd returns on investment. Everyone tries things and fails, and often you learn something from that failure. You gain something even as you lose the time and labor you put into it.

Capitalism offers another aspect of risk, your actual survival and social power in the world. If you invest your life savings into a project, and it goes badly, you become destitute. You can no longer afford to buy food, shelter, and clothing. Even worse, over-excited investors can even take out a bunch of loans (far more than they have the ability to pay off) in the hopes of funding a project with massive returns. If that project fails, they lose more than they ever even had. Declaring bankruptcy can help in the worst situations, but it's hardly an easy solution.

The questions, why exactly do we need that second sort of risk? It only exists because, under capitalism, everyone needs to pay someone else in order to get basic necessities. What's the benefit? To make people think more carefully about which projects they pursue, to weed out the people who are being careless with their investments? People never think a project is going to fail when they're betting so much on the outcome. It's sort of like harsher punishments for crime; they don't deter criminals as much as you'd think because nobody commits a crime thinking they're going to get caught. It doesn't matter if the punishment is execution or a fine. Same with innovation.

Speaking of innovation, this concept of risk is what large patent holders, especially in the pharmaceutical industry, claim justifies absurd prices on their final products. Even if a pill costs less than a cent to produce, the research and development supposedly justifies making that pill tens or hundreds or even thousands of dollars. But what exactly is the risk, here? Sure, wasted time can be expensive (employees can be one of the biggest costs in a business), but companies know that not every R&D project is going to bear fruit. The real "risk" is a decrease in short term profits that may or may not pay off in the future.

Imagine a world where the profit motive didn't exist, where Capitalism didn't exist. The only "risk" that would exist is the natural one, the one where people waste time and effort. But even then, it's not a waste to explore an option and see if it works or not, it's actually incredibly informative! You can learn a lot more from failure than from success at times. As for the "risk" to profitability? That wouldn't exist anymore. That's something that only happens under Capitalism.

Capitalism is a concentration of power in the guise of a free market

Let's say that you have the skills and ability to make a shoe, but you don't have the tools or materials. Let's also say that I have the tools and materials to make a shoe, but don't have the skills to do so. We come to an agreement where you make a shoe using my tools and materials. Who owns that shoe?

In the abstract, it seems that we both might. After all, both of our resources were necessary to produce the shoe at all. You might say you actually made it, but I would counter that you wouldn't have been able to without my resources. It feels proper that we should both

own it, and have to work together to determine what happens to it afterwards. Maybe you pay me a fee for the materials and tool maintenance to keep the shoe, or maybe I pay you for your expertise and labor to keep it for myself. In an idealized free market, this is how goods would be produced, with everyone involved in the production of a good having some say over what happens to it after.

Capitalism has an answer. The products belong to the owners of the capital, the tools and materials. A person may “own” their own labor, and may work to sell that labor in the market, but they cannot claim ownership of what that labor produces (though, of course, the Capitalist owns their own “labor” in terms of the effort needed to attain their capital).

All else being equal, this asymmetry of power is a core reason why Capitalism ends up breeding inequality between workers and business owners. The business owners simply have more pieces of the overall picture under their control. Not only that, but ownership of things is far more difficult to achieve than ownership over one’s labor. Everybody on earth (besides slaves) can decide how they use their own body and knowledge. Not everybody can own a shoe-making machine, or farmland, or a textile mill, or an online shopping platform.

This asymmetry shouldn’t be a surprise, either. After all, concentrating power in the hands of the owning class stretches back to even before feudalism, out of which capitalism arose. Whether farmland was owned by a king, landed nobility, or a Capitalist, workers have always been in a position where someone else has laid claim over the fruits of their labor simply by virtue of being wealthy and owning something already. The only part that’s changed is that Capitalism now pretends that workers have some additional ability to make choices about how much money they can request in exchange for their labor. And even that ends up being a lie, considering how much work Capitalists put into eliminating worker power.

If Capitalism claims that the products belong to the owners of capital, what does Contributionism say? Who owns the shoe made from my tools and your labor?

In a way, Contributionism takes the opposite stance to Capitalism: the product belongs to the laborer. You decided to make the shoe, you get to decide if you want to keep it or give it to someone else. I may have provided you the tools to do so, but I cannot require payment for the use of those tools, so I have no real power over the final product. You might also say that the product belongs to the laborer first, and the community as a whole second, since you similarly cannot demand payment for your product. Thus, a laborer under Contributionism has less power over the product than a capital owner does under Capitalism.

An Alternate Reality Critique

The following post, titled “What is Capitalism?”, was found on a blog from an alternate universe where Contributionism, not Capitalism, was the historically dominant economic system.

Today, I want to write about a strange little economic theory I've seen making the rounds online. If you haven't heard of Capitalism, the basic idea (as I understand it) is that instead of having people work together to create goods and services for others, you should have them work against each other in a competition. Meanwhile, everyone is given this thing called “money,” and people trade this money for those goods and services. If someone makes a good product, people pay more money for it. If they make a bad product, or something people don't want, then they don't get any of this money. It's kind of like a group vote if “votes” could be used up and you can put multiple votes into a single thing.

My goal with this blog post is to try to break down exactly how this system is supposed to work, and present the best version of a Capitalist's arguments that I can to do so. Then I'll explain why I don't think these arguments hold water. If there are any Capitalists out there, please feel free to respond down in the comments! I'm doing my best, but frankly, some of these arguments I'll get into are ones I just couldn't understand.

Alright, with that out of the way, let's get into it.

People compete against each other to make products

The primary goal of Capitalism, supposedly, is to make people compete against each other when making goods and services. This competition is supposed to make products better, since people are trying to make the product people want best. To facilitate this, everyone has something called “money,” which is kind of like a transferable set of votes. Customers “vote” by paying some amount of their money for a product. The products that gain the most money “win.”

This is a key point that took me a while to process. **Under capitalism, everyone has to pay money to get things.** This includes manufacturers getting the raw materials for their products. Even the people farming raw material need to pay for the tools to do so. The manufacturers that get more money have the ability to create more products, and the ones that don't can't. This results in the best-selling products being made more often.

There are a few concerns I have here.

How many products are manufacturers supposed to make to keep this competition up? For example Capitalists love to point out how libraries often have large stocks of older product models. Since they still work fine, nobody has bothered to break them down for parts. But, what's the alternative? Are people supposed to do this whole competition thing until they've bought the 10 lawn mowers needed to fill their local library? I can't imagine everyone would need to be buying one just for themselves, that'd be an incredible waste of resources.

Let's assume something wild and say that everyone does buy their own though. How many lawn mowers do you actually need? Some of the ones near me have been around for 30 years now, with just a few parts swapped out here and there over time. At some point, people will have their lawn mower. Then what? Why buy a new one when the one you have is still working fine?

Edit: Someone in the comments claimed that manufacturers would just make lawn mowers that don't last as long so they can keep making money selling new ones. They're almost certainly trolling, since Capitalism is supposed to be about making better products, but can you imagine? It really does feel like that's what would have to happen for manufacturers to keep getting money.

Finally, how much money is needed to buy each product? Capitalists claim that the price is set by manufacturers, and then people have to pay that price to get it. However, this doesn't seem workable. Sure, maybe manufacturers would be incentivized to lower prices somewhat, because otherwise they won't get any money, but the money they get is price * sales. You could imagine it'd be better overall to make fewer sales but at a higher price, which implies that some customers wouldn't be able to afford the product. What are those customers supposed to do, just go without? *Obvious leading question is obvious.*

People earn money by selling things

This one is straightforward in isolation. You may wonder where people get this "money" to vote on (and obtain) products with. The Capitalist's answer is by selling things. This is needed, apparently, in order to provide incentives for people to compete against each other in the first place? After all, you "win" by getting the most money, so what do you do with it? Apparently, use it to go vote on other products.

If you're like me, you may be wondering why people can't just be given a set amount of money every month (or week, or year, or whatever). That way, everyone has equal voting power for things. This could be done in two ways, and Capitalists claim that neither would work.

First, you could just give everyone that set amount every cycle. Capitalists claim this would be a problem because it would cause the supply of money to grow continuously. If everyone has more and more money, prices would rise more and more because people would be able to spend more and more, and the numbers would quickly become unmanageable.

Second, you could reset everyone's money to the beginning amount every cycle. Again, Capitalists claim this wouldn't be workable, because then competition wouldn't matter anymore. It's necessary that manufacturers lose or gain money over time based on who buys from them. If their money is reset every month or year, then their customer base wouldn't matter.

I agree with both of these arguments. However, I think they also reveal a more fundamental problem with money as a means of voting on products. Namely, that people can run out of money. What happens when someone is able to produce a product successfully, but doesn't make enough money to cover other things they want? What happens when someone

does poorly in the competition and can no longer afford basic necessities? What if someone is forced to buy something necessary, but expensive, and that locks them out of other things?

This is apparently a controversial subject in the Capitalist community. There are a few extremists out there that talk about how the people who run out of money are inherently failures who “contribute nothing to society” and therefore don’t deserve to live. That is nonsense, of course. Others argue that people could “sell” their own labor to help produce something using someone else’s tools and resources. *Fun fact; apparently, these tools and resources are called “capital,” and are the basis of “Capitalism.”* The problem is that some people may not be in a position to work. They might be sick and need medicine, or have a new child to take care of. I can’t imagine a world where those people would still be forced to go work for someone else just so they can keep getting money for necessities.

Which brings me to the final point.

Everything costs money

And by everything, I mean *everything*. Toys, tools, clothing, shelter, child care, medicine, even food and water. At this point, the primary incentive structure under Capitalism becomes clear. Everyone needs money to survive, so everyone needs to sell *something* to get that money. Everyone is competing with each other to sell the best *thing*, and so are incentivised to produce the best *thing* they can. The winners gain the most money, the losers gain nothing.

Remember how I kept asking questions about what people who run out of money are supposed to do? Well, it seems like the answer is “die.” Capitalism promises to give us better products by pitting all of humanity against itself in a giant contest of survival. How on earth could anyone think this is worth it just to get a slightly newer lawn mower?

There are so many other problems as well. For one, a voting system where one person can have a far higher voting power than another is inherently flawed. You don’t get the best products in that system, you get products that are to the taste of the people with the most money. The ones with less money are going to be deprived of something.

For another, I haven’t seen any real discussion of how much money a single person is allowed to stockpile. In fact, Capitalists seem to relish in the idea of gaining a huge amount of money and then using it to get whatever you want. It’s almost as if this whole exercise is just a way to bypass some of the waiting lines we have for newly in-demand products. Of course, Capitalists assume they’ll be the ones with the most money.

Speaking of which, there doesn’t seem to be any particular reason why just a few manufacturers couldn’t control a whole market. With more money comes a larger ability to buy up “capital,” which means more ability to earn money, which means more ability to buy “capital.” It allows an exponential growth of money which can propel people upwards merely because they had money to begin with. Meanwhile, people without money still need food and clothing, so they’d be stuck paying for necessities and never be able to buy “capital” themselves.

As one last point, I have to wonder what happens to products that don't sell. If a product doesn't get bought (such as food that comes close to expiring), what happens? I've seen mixed opinions on this. Some Capitalists claim that manufacturers can just sell those products at a lower and lower price until someone buys it. Others claim that would drive down prices for the products that do get bought, since people would just wait for the price to drop, so they'd have to be thrown away or otherwise destroyed. Seems incredibly wasteful to me.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, Capitalism seems like an interesting thought experiment, but one that can't possibly function in the real world. It really hinges on everything costing money, which has devastating consequences to those who lose out on competition. I'm not willing to have people starve to death just so I can have a slightly better product.

To be fair, there are some Capitalists out there that do try to address some of the problems I've pointed out. For example, they imagine a world where some central organization takes a small portion of money from everyone that can afford it, then uses that money to provide the necessities to people who've run out. This seems potentially doable, though it makes me wonder what central structure this would be and how the need for money would impact its operation. Would the people running it also require a cut of the collected "tax?"

Others take another tactic and say we should exempt necessities altogether from the Capitalist system, and just run it on luxuries we want to optimize. This one I'm much more skeptical of, since it seems to remove a fair amount of the incentive Capitalists claim needs to be in place to motivate competition and reward winners while punishing losers. Also, how does the person providing a raw material deal with some people who need it for a necessary good and others who need it for a luxury?

Let me know down in the comments what you think of Capitalism. What arguments have you heard, and what are your thoughts on them? I'd be very interested to see if my concerns have been addressed yet.