From Anarchy to Captialism

A Tale of Social Evolution

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There is a principle in developmental biology known as ‘Meckel-Serres law’ which basically states that the development of an individual embryo recapitulates, in microcosm, all the stages of the evolution of the species itself.  Summed up by the phrase “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”, it is a rather pleasing idea that has been applied to other fields, even though now discredited in its home discipline. Nonetheless I would like to apply it in the economic and political sphere to the particular social microcosm in which I have lived for the past thirty-four years. For this very local environment seems to have undergone many stages of social development – from individualistic anarchy, through tribal co-operation (a kind of proto-socialism) to a fully fledged capitalist structure – during that time; and in the process has mirrored, in its own little arena, many of the key social, economic and political issues displayed in the wider society as a whole over a much longer time period.  It is, at any rate, rather fun to see it in that way.

I was brought up in the 60’s and 70’s and developed the mentality typical of the end of the hippy-era. I studied philosophy at university and hitch-hiked to India in search of higher consciousness and to enjoy all the fruits of the counter-culture. When it came time to find somewhere to live back in London, England, I wanted to continue a free and easy lifestyle consistent with that ethos. I was struck one day by an advert in ‘Exchange and Mart’ (a paper consisting of classified adverts for the sale of all and everything) offering an old wooden narrowboat for sale.  It seemed that this might offer precisely the kind of lifestyle I was after. It was my first foray into the world of boats and inland waterway living in England, interspersed with bouts of travel.

After returning from one such bout and having acquired a different boat – an old river tug – I was faced with the familiar, and by now increasingly important, question of where to moor the boat. I had previously travelled around on the canal system quite a bit as a ‘water gypsy’, following the ancient rule of never staying longer than the permitted two weeks in any parish (!); but this was becoming onerous and it dawned on me, and many other fellow boat-dwellers, that a secure mooring situation was rarer and more valuable than the boat itself.  It was after a short sojourn in a commercial boatyard whilst doing repairs to the boat that I happened across, completely fortuitously, a place to moor the boat that seemed ideal. I could not then have known exactly how ideal – nor that it would, because of that, become my home for more than three decades.

At that time the waterways in that part of London were controlled by two statutory bodies: the Port of London Authority, (PLA) which controlled the tidal Thames and the British Waterways Board (BWB) which controlled the canal system.  The short stretch of canal I had stumbled across was at the end of the canal system where it joined the tidal Thames. It had the curious feature of being half-tidal. That is, the tide came into the canal, filling it with water; but a lock and weir system prevented ‘half’ the water from flowing out as the tide receded. Unlike the banks of the fully tidal Thames, which dries out completely, this stretch of canal always had water to float the boats at all times. Further up the canal was another set of locks that were traditionally used to gauge the weight of cargo being carried by commercial boats entering the canal system and thereby determine the tariff to be paid.  The canal authorities historically (prior to the BWB) had been principally concerned with monitoring commercial traffic on the system from the gauging locks and above, on the completely non-tidal canal.  For this is where the collection of tariffs began. Whereas the PLA have always only been concerned with the fully tidal Thames. But between the two sets of locks – the half mile or so of half-tidal section – appeared to be a bureaucratic no-man’s land.

The practical upshot of this was that one could, seemingly, moor a boat along this erstwhile wharf without anyone requiring one to move on after a specified period. It also meant there was no statutory authority levying any mooring fees or license fees to be on that stretch of water. One could simply tie up one’s boat indefinitely and for free. Not only that, but adjacent to part of that stretch of canal, higher than the towpath, was a plot of land that, although owned by the local Borough Council, was unused and empty. Perfect…

And so began the first evolutionary stage of social life emerging on this curiously overlooked waterway niche on the edge of the city: the stage of individualistic anarchy. I tied up my boat and started my life there. As free and easy as it sounds, the fact is that along with their being no bureaucratic oversight or control, comes the inevitable corollary: there were no facilities nor any infrastructure of any kind. The first physical hazard was a consequence of the canal being half-tidal without any mooring stagings or pontoons to tie to. On high Spring tides there was the possibility of the water rising high enough that the towpath flooded and one’s boat could float over it and be beached on it when the tide receded. Or worse, that it would settle half-on and half-off the towpath – with the keel precariously balanced on the stone capstones along the edge of the towpath. This would carry with it the danger that it might tip over into the canal at low water, with catastrophic results. So the first task was a bit of DIY civil engineering involving getting some long steel poles, and driving them vertically into the mud at the bottom of the canal and so that they protruded high above the level of the towpath, to act as preventative posts stopping the boat drifting over it on a high tide. The stability and efficacy of this arrangement was a matter of constant vigilance.

After securing the physical safety of the mooring the question then turned to basic facilities, the first being water. Although the boat had water tanks, these obviously needed refilling periodically. I made an arrangement with a nearby car workshop, for a modest cash sum, to hook up an absurdly long hose pipe approximately once a month to do this refilling task. Then the question of fuel for heating and cooking: portable gas bottles fuelled a cooker and a shower and a hot tap at the kitchen sink; a solid fuel stove, burning wood and coal, provided ample heating. Lighting was provided by pressurised kerosene lamps, which were also a source of heat. All of this meant carrying large gas bottles, bags of coal, and 25 litre containers of kerosene; it also meant collecting or chopping firewood from off-cuts scavenged with consent from a local timber yard.  The water pumping system on the boat was 12 volt electric and driven off the engine batteries, which needed charging regularly by running the engine, or by a portable back up petrol generator, the fuel for which also had to be carried in jerry cans.

There was also the awkward question of what to do with waste water and sewage. Strictly speaking, as it was a (half) tidal waterway it was legal to let both drain into the canal on a high tide. As horrible as it sounds, this was not so different from what happened ‘on land’ anyway. London’s old Victorian sewers ran parallel in the same tunnel as the surface drain water; when there was heavy rain during a storm it was common for the water to over-top the dividing wall and mix with the sewage. This meant that considerable amounts of the city’s sewage ended up draining into the Thames anyway.  Which made the alternative – taking the boat to a pump-out station some considerable distance away – seem somewhat pointless. I did this anyway, and made a day trip of it. Rubbish could be deposited in public bins on the nearby High street and commercial launderettes (laundromats) on the same street could take care of clothes’ washing.

These were in the days before mobile phones, let alone the internet. So phone calls had to be made from public payphone booths, also on the High street. So I could call out, but could not myself be reached by phone. This did not seem a big inconvenience at the time, in fact I quite liked it. The local boatyard agreed to allow me to use them as a postal address.

I was all set to lead a peaceful, low-cost, rent-free and mortgage-free life, beholden to no-one. One lived “off-grid” at the cost of being a modern-day ‘hunter-gatherer’. There was a nice feeling of self-sufficiency purchased at the cost of always having to have half-an-eye on the need to replenish supplies, which involved some not inconsiderable physical exertion. Of course our true hunter-gatherer ancestors got their supplies direct from the natural environment. My ersatz hunter-gatherer status meant engaging with the wider society – working to get money to pay for mine.  Still, after a day’s work one could sit on the deck of the boat – away from traffic and opposite a park – with a feeling of self-sufficient autonomy whilst fondly entertaining the illusion of being free from ‘the system’.

Many times I reflected that I had achieved a little slice of paradise.

Of course, it wasn’t true; all tales of paradise end up with some snake in the grass coming to spoil things.  At first the only problem seemed to be one of the security of the mooring.  I was not the only one to have discovered the place and more and more boat-dwellers were anxious to enjoy the benefits of a free and undisturbed mooring spot. What this meant was that one couldn’t leave the mooring and go cruising without the risk that one’s mooring place had been taken by another boat by the time one returned.  The only way to guard one’s patch was never to leave it – which was not quite the free and easy, mobile and yet secure lifestyle we all aimed at. Also leaving the boat on the mooring and going away for a few days or weeks carried the risk of the aforementioned tidal mishap, or simply that of burglary.

So at the point when the wharf became full of boats, with each boat-dweller anxious to hold on to their mooring, the social evolution of the place moved to the second stage – from individualistic anarchy to a more ‘co-operative anarchy’.  Obviously one got to know one’s neighbours very quickly – there was a lot to share about one’s experience of living afloat, its joys and challenges. This formed the beginning of a social life, an embryonic community, where people would look out for each other and their boats. If someone was away we would keep half an eye out for the physical security of their mooring lines and general state of their boat, many of which were old and of borderline water-worthiness (!)  More interestingly, there developed a sense of each boat-dweller having proprietary ‘rights’ over their mooring space, which was mutually agreed upon and reciprocally protected. So if one went away cruising the others would protect one’s space and prevent ‘outsiders’ – passing boat-dwellers on the lookout for somewhere to moor – from taking one’s mooring.  Now of course they had absolutely no authority to do this. None of us had any rights to any of the available mooring space and the current residents’ efforts at deterring ‘newcomers’ from mooring there were all bluff.  The fact that we were prepared to co-operate in protecting ‘our’ moorings from intruders was the first sign of a developing tribal mentality which would go on to define social life on the wharf more and more.

A developmentally significant moment came when, in order to acquire some legitimacy and security for our presence on the wharf, some residents suggest that we approach the relevant authorities – the PLA, the BWB and the local Council – and offer to pay for a mooring license/rent or lease for the moorings we occupied.  We thus formed a ‘residents association’, made a list of residents and their boats and collectively approached the various authorities. To no avail. None would admit to having any responsibility over that stretch of canal or towpath, or the particular wharf we were on.  To some this was a disappointment, for it meant that we had to carry on in the absence of any provable legitimacy or security to our occupation of the wharf. To others it was a relief, for it meant that that we could continue rent-free plus now without any sense that we were trespassing on any authorities’ legitimate domain. We had come clean and they weren’t interested.  It was some years before I was to discover exactly why this was so. In the meantime it was at least evident that we were breaking no laws.

So we carried on in our state of co-operative anarchy, which acquired a degree of stability and economic freedom which some still regard as the halcyon days of life on the wharf.  There were parties on the towpath and big bonfires on the adjacent disused land. We helped one another with big deliveries of coal, ferrying the heavy bags in small dinghies along the canal from where the delivery truck dropped them off.  We shared knowledge and helped each other with boat repairs. Life on the water attracted a cast of colourful characters who got involved in all sorts of shenanigans.  It is for another occasion to recount their tales, but some of their nicknames may give a flavour of our delightful theatre: Graham the Moonie convert whose boat we called the Chapel; Graham the pole-vaulter who vaulted right across the canal; Dave the Water Rat, who looked like one; Enigmatic Steve the woodworker; Hairy Dave and Nina the Ice Queen; Bob the Sculptor and Lisa; Nigel the Shark; Sal the Artist; the Chinese pornographers; Paul the Goat, who kept one on the land; Paula the Grump; the Cabbage and the Boss-eyed Bitch, Dick the Secret Agent …and many others. Three babies were born on boats on the wharf in the first five years that I was there.

Life on the wharf eventually reached a milestone in its developmental journey precipitated by two near-simultaneous occurrences.  They both represented an interesting increase in tribal authoritarianism, with a definite socialist tinge. The first, somewhat trivial, situation concerned the fact that when there was a combination of a very high tide along with significant rainfall it was common for significant amounts of mud, silt and rubbish to be deposited on the towpath. This resulted in the need for an extensive clean-up operation.  Unfortunately some residents of the wharf seemed more reluctant than others to join in with this laborious and dirty task.  It was no use just clearing one’s own section of the towpath unless everyone did the same, for otherwise mud picked up on the uncleaned area got trodden everywhere.  It was noticed that those with a greater apparent tolerance for, or indifference to, the presence of the mud often left the work to be done by those that cared more.  This naturally caused resentment; but this was often countered with the (true) statement that “I didn’t cause the mud and am not responsible for the state of the towpath – if you don’t like it that’s your problem…”.  Many people who take to living on a boat have a strong individualistic streak and have a commensurately strong dislike for any kind of collective mentality or action.  I had a lot of sympathy for that. But at the same time, and in some cases, this was largely disingenuous as it masked the phenomenon of ‘free-riding’: enjoying the fruits of collective effort whilst not contributing to that effort.  I remember contemplating the political dimensions of this phenomenon, which resulted in some striking paradoxes, as it appeared to be a phenomenon of both the Left and Right. There were those on the Left – whose values one would think should prioritise social and collective attitudes and actions – who displayed this ‘free-riding’ attitude under the guise of ‘rights’.  In social media recently one such attitude was shamelessly touted:

“Remember babes, there’s nothing moral about work and you have basic human rights to food, water, shelter and health care (among other things) whether you work or not.”

Quite where the food, water, shelter etc were to come from if everyone adopted that attitude remains a mystery.  “Babes” is right. It is an infantile attitude that treats the whole world and human society as a proto-parent that should unstintingly provide for the infant – a baby who remains oblivious to, but totally dependent upon, the sources of that support.  The simple reality is that if you don’t provide the basics for yourself then someone else must do it for you, as well as for themselves.

On the other hand there are those more on the Right who, imagining themselves to be fiercly self-reliant, proceed to pursue their own self-interests vigorously whilst all the time operating in an environment and using an infrastructure that they themselves did not create, yet at the same time failing to acknowledge the collective effort that did create it.  This too is a form of free-riding.  In economic jargon it is the result of ignoring ‘externalities’. The phenomenon of free-riding is a challenge to both Left and Right wing attitudes that need to come to terms with the fact that whilst no man should remain a baby – as Marcus Aurelius said :”Man should be upright, not kept upright”; yet also, as John Donne said:  “No man is an island, entire of itself”.

The situation over the mud led to heated meetings of the Residents Association where it was finally decided, on a majority vote, to draw up a Code of Conduct to be followed by any actual or potential resident of the wharf.  The first clause of this Code was that every resident was responsible for keeping their area of the towpath clear and clean of any mud or rubbish. Other clauses concerned other ‘antisocial’ behaviours such as the running of noisy generators at unsocial hours.  There had always been an ethos of ‘live and let live’ on the wharf, but the previously anarchic emphasis on ‘live (as you please)’ was being replaced by a greater emphasis on ‘let live (by obeying the Code)’ as life on the wharf transitioned to the third stage of evolution: from a co-operative anarchy to a tribal socialism.

Of course there was no way of enforcing adherence to the Code of Conduct other than meting out social disapproval toward non-compliers.  In the absence of any security other than the mutual protectiveness displayed by residents, the possibility of incurring one’s neighbours’ displeasure did act as quite a strong incentive, though.  In our small way we were working through the age-old tension between the values of Freedom and Equality that has been at the heart of political issues since humankind first formed social groupings.  It seems right that people be treated by, and contribute to, the tribe equally; but it also seems right that people should be free to engage, or not, with the tribe to the degree that they find acceptable.  Between these ideals there is an irreconcilable tension.  The prevalent ‘hippy’ mentality had always been characterised by an avoidance of social responsibility; yet it was becoming gradually clear that to enjoy the right to protection by one’s fellows inevitably entailed a responsibility towards them, in equal measure.

The second, and more significant, situation occurred when one of the residents announced that he was going away on an extensive cruise in his boat and that he was getting some friends – also boat-dwellers – to bring their boat in to occupy his mooring space and live there for the duration of his absence. These friends were going to ‘baby-sit’ his mooring until his return – a return that, in the event, kept getting postponed. Nonetheless, all went well until, in conversation with our new, temporary neighbours, they happened to mention how much they liked the wharf and were pleased at how reasonable the rent was.  It transpired that they had entered an agreement with their friend, not only to occupy his mooring, but to pay for the privilege of doing so as well.  Of course many of the other residents were outraged that the original occupant was charging ‘rent’ for a mooring he had no legal right to himself and which was not ‘his’.  Fuel was added to the fire when it was rumoured that the original occupant kept putting off his return as he was financing his cruising lifestyle by renting out ‘his’ mooring, whilst of course paying no rent himself.

Some residents were of the opinion that whatever arrangements the friends had come to, financial or otherwise, they were of no concern to anyone else; and as long as both parties were happy with the deal they should be left to get on with it. Others, of a more socialist persuasion, had the opposite view. They regarded the mooring space on the wharf, officially unregulated as it was, much like political thinkers regarded ‘the commons’ – common land or resources that are not privately owned and should be publicly available.  We were all, as boat-dwellers, in genuine need of a place to moor; and this need gave us the moral ‘right’ to occupy otherwise unused space.  But the places were limited and few, so if one didn’t really need it one should give it up and let other boat-dwellers in need use it.  The attempt to capitalise privately on the free space was as reprehensible as the ‘tragedy of the commons’ whereby common resources were purloined by private ‘owners’ for their own profit.  The Enclosures of common land in England during the middle ages is a prime example of this ‘tragedy’.

Of course the debate was not so clear cut. After all, we had long been protecting each others mooring spaces from intrusion by ‘outsiders’ on the basis that we did feel that we had proprietary rights over them. What difference did it make simply that some money also changed hands into the bargain?  Some residents felt that, far from charging ‘rent’, the original occupant should have paid the ‘baby-sitters’ to guard his mooring space.  Issues like these go to the very heart of the concept of ‘property’ itself, so it was not surprising that the heated discussions at residents meetings over what, if anything, to do about the situation went round in circles.  It was no good declaring, in true communist fashion, that ‘property is theft’, all the while hanging on to one’s ‘own’ space for dear life.  What if some other boat-dwellers turned up who demonstrably had more ‘need’ of the mooring than you (say if they had a young family on board)? Would you willingly give up your mooring in their favour? Do you even ‘own’ the boat you’re in? Perhaps you should give that up as well. Or might you be willing even to part with money in order to stay?  In which case are you not ‘stealing’ from the more needy family? This is the heart of the communist paradox: the statement that ‘property is theft’ is meaningless because there can be no concept of ‘theft’ without a concept of ‘property’.

The heat was turned up when some residents informed their new rent-paying neighbours that their ‘landlord’ – who had claimed to ‘own’ the mooring – did not have any legal right to it and so could not legally charge them rent.  Moreover, as the new occupants of the mooring they had as much ‘right’ to stay indefinitely, and rent-free, as the previous occupant.  They were shocked and delighted to discover this and seemed happy to forgo their erstwhile ‘friendship’ and immediately stopped paying ‘rent’.  The original occupant came hurrying back with his boat and there ensued an ugly stand-off with threats to cut mooring lines and forcibly remove the offending boat. The police were called to act as ‘witnesses to a civil dispute’ and in case things turned violent.  Finally the matter was resolved with the original occupant returning all the ‘rent’ that had been paid by his ‘tenants’ plus a cash ‘consideration’ in compensation for them having been ‘deceived’.  The original occupant also showed the police some documentation from the original Residents Association meetings where a list of boats and occupants were drawn up. Obviously his name was on it.  Surprisingly this seemed to carry weight with the police at the time, though it would not have survived deeper investigation. Luckily matters were resolved before that became necessary.

The upshot of all this was that, in yet another long and heated residents meeting, there passed a vote to amend the Code of Conduct to include a clause to the effect that no resident could ‘rent’ out their mooring space.  The philosophical questions over the nature of ‘property’ were not, of course, solved; instead the grounds for the new clause was simply a desire not to have a repeat of the recent ugly confrontation.  As often in politics, expediency ruled over principle.

Having put the offending resident ‘in his place’ a certain clique within the Residents Association seemed to develop a liking for ever-more meetings and consequent additions to clauses in the Code of Conduct: everything from the storing of marine equipment on the towpath, to how and where to park cars on the adjacent land, to the need to get permission to throw parties, on when and whether to ‘dredge’ one’s mooring by running the engine in gear whilst tied up (to allow the action of the propellor to shift mud).  Gradually the days of individualistic anarchy were fading into memory, as an authoritarian, ‘socialist’ regime became established and certain ‘cadres’ seemed to have their noses in everyone else’s business.

I myself came up against censure by the regime when I also announced plans to travel; but I was going to leave my boat on the mooring and take myself off to India for several months, maybe longer.  I also had someone who was prepared to live on my boat and also pay a little rent to help finance my trip. As far as I was concerned this should not have been a problem. After all I was not renting out the mooring per se but my boat – which I definitely did own. As I had done considerable work to convert my former commercial tug into a habitable dwelling I felt no compunction at charging someone for the benefit of enjoying the fruits of my labour.  Others on the mooring did not agree, and sought to invoke the clause in the Code of Conduct preventing the ‘renting’ out of space on the wharf to stop me.  Enough residents were on my side to sway the issue, and in any case I made it clear that, Code or no Code, nothing was going to stop my plans.  I regarded the whole episode as an unwarranted interference in my life for purely ideological reasons based on envy and the desire to control others. It put a big dent in my socialist leanings as I began to see the dark side of political motivation masquerading as a concern for social equity.  What began as an experiment in living free from ‘the system’ ended up in the creation of yet another ‘system’ – and one that had the potential to be more intrusive and less free, because of its local nature, than the one we were escaping from in the first place (or at least thought we were).

It is hard to speculate on how things may have evolved further had not the force majeure of the wider economic environment ran into, and threaten to burst, the little social bubble we had created for ourselves. As it was, our whole community was threatened by some alarming news that we long expected and then finally received: the adjacent land had been sold by the Council to private developers and the whole site was up for extensive redevelopment. Many residents feared the worst.  As had happened on numerous other mooring sites on the inland waterways, the development of waterside property could mean the eviction of boats from ‘unofficial’ moorings.  Often new waterside property was sold along with mooring rights for pleasure craft, which many feared would replace our motley collection of live-aboard vessels.  However, in the light of the previous denials by the PLA, the BWB and the Council as being responsible for the actual towpath and canal, others thought that, although we would lose use of the land being built on, the moorings themselves may well remain unaffected.

Not wanting to leave things to happenstance, and convinced that we may well get into a better conversation with a private company than our previous experience with government bureaucrats, a small group of us decided to take the bull by the horns and approach the developers themselves to initiate a conversation about their plans for the area and how they might impinge on our possible future.  It proved a turning point in the history of life on the wharf and it hinged on two pieces of very good fortune: firstly, that this all happened in the late 1980’s under Thatcher’s Tory government, which was actively pursuing a policy of encouraging PPPs – Public and Private Partnerships in development projects; secondly, that the development was being led by an architect, who in his days as a student of architecture, had himself lived on a boat on the Thames.  He was all for the live-afloat lifestyle. He told us that his company’s plans did not include anything other than building two apartment blocks on the land, but that he was not averse to extending them to include the installation of proper mooring facilities for full residential use if a sensible deal could be worked out.  This would involve a four-way conversation between his company, the Council and the relevant waterway authority to get permissions, and us potential residents.  We said that we did not know who the relevant authority was and told him of our previous attempts to talk to the PLA and the BWB.  We came away from our first meeting with the developers with a feeling of buoyant optimism.

As a spokesperson for a property development company with capital it could invest, the architect was in a position to encourage the water authorities to be more forthcoming.  It turned out that the BWB were responsible for our stretch of half-tidal canal.  Officially, they denied ever having had any contact with us residents and claimed ignorance of our presence there. Off the record, they admitted to the architect that our approach to them had put them in an awkward position. If they admitted to knowing of our presence they could not allow us to stay without providing some minimal infrastructure to make mooring in a half-tidal stretch feasible and safe; they would be held responsible for ensuring that that happened but they did not feel in a position to make any capital investment to that end.  If they refused to let us stay then they would have to take steps to ensure our removal; and they knew from experience that such efforts are usually futile, since no sooner had we gone then either we, or other, equivalent boat-dwellers would simply return. The prospect of a free mooring was too attractive. They would have to secure the site in some way which made that impossible and that would also require investment. It was considered expedient simply to ignore the situation.

However, with the prospect of a private company being prepared to make whatever capital investment was required to provide the necessary infrastructure and facilities for a residential mooring, they suddenly saw the prospect of making an income from the site at no cost to themselves: as the statutory authority they could grant permissions for a residential mooring in return for a hefty percentage of the income so generated, all at no cost to themselves other than that of drawing up the legal paperwork.  Given the prevailing political climate the executives at the BWB involved would get a pat on the back from their political masters, who were all for encouraging partnerships between government bodies and private enterprise – PPPs – defraying the cost of development projects onto the private sector, whilst getting a slice of the action for themselves.  It may look different when a government body does it, but isn’t it, arguably, just another case of free-riding?

The whole situation put me in a state of cognitive dissonance with regard to my own political leanings.  As a leftie, I hated most of what Thatcherism stood for. I thought of the attempted introduction of a Poll Tax – chargeable to the entire adult population irrespective of means – as morally reprehensible; as was, in my view, the whole way the shutting down of coal mines and the treatment of the coal miners was mishandled.  Yet here I was in a situation where private enterprise and individual initiative might achieve something of which bureaucratic government proved incapable.  If it made economic sense to invest in the development of residential moorings on our site, in return for a rental income from the residents, then why could not the BWB themselves do it? Why rely on an outside private contractor who would inevitably be reaping the most rewards?  Not being profit-motivated the BWB could afford to achieve the same result and ultimately charge the residents less; it would be performing a valuable social function, as there was a high demand from boat-dwellers for legitimacy and security for their chosen way of life. But the BWB had never encouraged living on boats on the canals. Any interaction with them revealed an inward-looking, bureaucratic machine concerned only with its own administrative tasks; this contrasted completely with the outward-looking, opportunity-seeking and enterprising energy displayed by the private company with which we were dealing.

Meanwhile back on the moorings a divide was growing between those who were keen for the development to go ahead and those that wanted things to stay as they were. The developers promised mooring stagings supplied with water, electricity and phone lines to each mooring. There would be rubbish and sewage disposal facilities and a limited number of car parking spaces. There would also be a building for storage facilities, a laundry and a toilet block. All in exchange for rent payable to the developers who would become our landlords. They in turn would purchase from the BWB, at some considerable expense, a long lease to run a residential mooring on that stretch of the canal along with a contract specifying what to facilities to provide and at what minimum expense.  The BWB would also get a significant percentage of the rental income generated.  Having officially recognised the presence of our boats on the canal system they also charged each individual boat owner a ‘license’ to be on their waterway, along with imposing minimum safety standards and insurance requirements for each boat.  As residents we in turn would get individual long leases giving us the right to remain (as long as we paid our rent to the developers and boat license fees to the BWB); as well, of course, as use of all the facilities.  In due course of time the local Borough Council would register us as residents of the Borough and we would also be liable to pay Council Tax – a local property tax. So from living entirely free from paying any overheads, we would go on to become liable, therefore, for three lots of charges: rent for mooring to the land, licenses for the boats being on the water and local property tax. As well, of course, as paying insurance and utility bills for electricity and phone etc.  We would be well and truly ‘on-grid’ and part of the ‘system’.

No wonder then, that some preferred to stay as they were and wanted to us to cease to have any dealings with the developers or the BWB.  They would rather live free and insecure and provide for themselves.  I understood this point of view and empathised with it to a degree; but I was fed up with experiencing a constant background feeling of insecurity in relation to the mooring, and whether or not I could stay there, or for how long.  I also felt that, in a way, the cat was now well and truly out of the bag. The proposed development on land was going to go ahead anyway and it would only be a matter of time before it was extended to the situation regarding the moorings as well, and we may as well make sure that we, and not some other group of boat owners, were the beneficiaries.  I was also gratified by assurances made by the architect that the rents would be reasonable and that there would be no charge ‘up-front’ for the issuing of leases to the residents.  Such charges (‘key money’ as it was often known) were common and often considerable –  and certainly beyond the pocket of the less financially well-situated of our residents. It also meant that from the word go we would, although paying rent, be in possession of a long lease that was in itself a valuable asset.  The prospect of joining, to whatever modest degree, the property-owning bourgeoisie was luring some of us away from our previous free-wheeling, hippy, anarchist ways.

So with a predictable and inexorable inevitability the juggernaut of the prevailing Capitalism came and crushed our anarchic, quasi-socialist, not-so-utopian way of life.  We were now all tenants and had to pay our rents to the corporate Man and taxes to Big Brother, and in return we had running water, electricity, phones and legal security.  As much as I could be wistfully nostalgic for the early days, the truth was that I felt a curious kind of liberation. Not so much the material liberation afforded by having physical facilities immediately available, though that was something; rather, the liberation from a kind of claustrophobic relationship to one’s neighbours, born our felt need for mutual co-operation.  I felt like the young adult finally free to disappear into the anonymity of the big city after being brought up in the confines of a petty village life, complete with prying and sometimes feuding neighbours.  With the provision of proper mooring stagings the physical security of the mooring was established and my lease gave legal security to my occupancy of it.  I was no longer dependent upon, nor beholden to, my neighbours in any way.  I know most other residents felt the same way.  The Code of Conduct was mostly done away with. Most of its clauses, such as those concerning the running of generators, or car parking were now redundant. The only one to survive was a general one regarding ‘anti-social’ behaviour.  The requirement prohibiting the sub-letting of one’s mooring to another boat/occupant was written in to the terms of the lease by the new landlord to avoid complications arising from doubts about who to collect the rent from; and to avoid the possibility of sub-tenants not paying rent, occupying the mooring with their own boat, but not being signatories to the enforceable terms of the lease, either. (Obviously renting out one’s own boat on the mooring was not a problem).

Life on the wharf changed as it went through this, the most crucial, transition.  We had evolved to the fourth stage – that of being equal, rent-paying tenants ‘oppressed’ by the Capitalist system (!)  I think it is fair to say that the sense of close community considerably weakened. There was no longer the need to ‘look out’ for one another in the same way. Some residents found the new way of life not so appealing, not least because of the expense. Some could no longer afford to live there and, cashing in on the value of their long lease, sold up and left.  This ushered in a new kind of resident: people who had invested not inconsiderable sums of money to get a boat on the mooring. On the whole their attitude was understandably different from that of the original, free-wheeling community.

Having said that, it is also true that even the original members’ attitudes to their boats and lifestyle changed. Suddenly we were more conscious of the enviable lifestyle having a secure mooring afforded us, and so even more conscious, in a way, of the need to protect it. On this score I have to include myself, and to confess to an incident that gave me distinct misgivings at the time and which I still look back on with ambivalence.  Because of the new security provided by a long lease, I decided it was worth investing in my life there to a greater extent. I built a houseboat of much larger proportions than my existing boat, in order to maximise the mooring space that the new lease entitled me to.  This was obviously an expensive business even though I did the majority of the work myself. Within only a few weeks of having my new home towed to my mooring space I came home one day to discover that a group of ‘water gypsies’, itinerant boat-dwellers without moorings, had tied up directly opposite my houseboat on the other side of the canal.  Mooring there was not permissible as there was no towpath or proper access. To get on and off their boats they were rowing across in small dinghies, tying up to my boat, and clambering over my decks to get on land.  This is the sort of thing that is commonplace in boatyards, or crowded marinas, and I had had to do it myself decades ago when I had the same itinerant lifestyle.  But I had not invested considerable time, money and energy to expand my ‘property’ only to have my peace disturbed by a bunch of free-riders (!)  As a license and rent paying, legitimate boat-dweller I phoned up the BWB and told them that a bunch of ‘dodgy’ boats were illegally occupying that stretch of canal and disturbing the rightful residents.  The BWB sent their patrol officers and had them moved on.  The view from my lounge windows and my peace were restored. The poacher had truly turned game-keeper. Mea Culpa.

How did that tie in with my overall political beliefs? I couldn’t help but think of the political adage, attributed to Clemenceau, to the effect that if when young you aren’t on the Left, you have no heart; but if you reach thirty and have not moved to the Right, you have no head.  Perhaps one’s sense of political orientation gets corrupted in the process, but I still thought of myself as left of centre even though my experiences had definitely pushed me rightward.

One consequence of the gradual influx of new residents who had bought live-aboard boats on our secure residential mooring was that they saw their investment primarily as a place to live. They didn’t necessarily know anything about boats at all.  Previously we had all been boat-dwellers who maintained our own craft. We prided ourselves on our self-reliance and many learned a great deal about boat repairs and marine engine systems, plus, obviously basic boat handling.  To us some of the newcomers seemed like children in relation to the boats they occupied. Some couldn’t even adjust their mooring lines without help.  Whereas we had always dealt ourselves with any problems relating to the moorings, the new residents looked towards the landlords – who proved equally unable and unwilling to be pro-active in keeping an eye on things. Far from it- they, or their representatives, never visited the site.  The BWB were also noticeable by their continued absence. For many years nothing was done to maintain the canal on our stretch and this continued even though we were all paying license fees to them.

After some years the same group of us that had originally approached the developers about their plans for the area started to think about regaining our previous freedom and control of our wharf.  We started to contemplate buying out our developer landlords and taking over the lease ourselves.  Everyone was in favour of this idea, at least in principle.  It represented a possible fifth stage in our social evolution: progressing from rent-paying tenants to owner-occupiers.  It turned out that the developers were also interested in doing a deal. They hated being landlords and were only interested in new development projects – not the daily hassles of ensuring the collection of rent and dealing with mundane and routine issues of property maintenance. They were offering a very reasonable deal over the sale of the lease to us. It was, nonetheless, a considerable sum of money – obviously enough to recoup the original investment plus a good return, as well as compensation for the loss of the rental income stream.  Also, if they agreed to sell to us, who exactly were “we”?

So started another round of intense residents meetings to determine exactly how to go about things.  The obvious, immediate idea was to form some kind of Co-operative.  The old, socialist ideals re-surfaced, with visions of an egalitarian community where all contributed to, and had an equal say in running things.  But it looked as if we might fall at the first hurdle: namely, how to raise the money to buy the lease from the developers?  If we divided the buying price equally between all the residents it still amounted to a prohibitively large sum.  As well as our own contributions we would have to borrow from a bank. Some pointed out, though, that once we became owners of the lease we could set the rent ourselves. We would need only pay enough to cover the percentage that went to the BWB plus the repayments on a bank loan.  But when the sums were done it was obvious that, as well as digging deep into our own pockets, we would have to continue to pay ‘rent’ at the same rate as previously in order to pay back the bank.  This situation would have to continue for many years.   The prospect of having to carry on paying as much rent as before, as well as raise enough of a contribution (by taking out personal loans or however) to meet the asking price for the lease, proved too much for the majority of the residents.

In an attempt to get round this we considered borrowing even more from the bank and use the extra to loan to those residents who could not afford to raise their own contribution.  The terms we could get on the main business loan would be better than many could get on personal loans from their own bank.  They would pay a lower interest rate and the repayment period could be extended. In short we bent over backwards to try and include every one of the residents in our co-operative investment in order to wrest control over the wharf back into all of our hands. Unfortunately the majority could still not agree to the extra financial commitment over and above the rent they were already paying.  The dream of an equal co-operative running the wharf dissolved in the cold, financial light of day.

Those of us in the minority were left with a choice: let the dream dissolve for us as well; or take on the whole financial burden ourselves. This latter would mean raising considerably more for our own individual contribution and borrowing more from the bank.  This we decided to do.  It meant that the structure could no longer be a real co-operative and we were advised simply to form a limited company with each of us being equal shareholders.  This we did and then approached the bank, which agreed to the loan.  This enabled us, not only to buy the lease from the developers, but also to buy the freehold of the facilities building and that of our car parking area and rubbish facility.  This meant that the company that we shareholders now jointly owned, as hugely indebted as it was, was the only entity that could run a residential mooring on the site.

Though outwardly nothing very much seemed to change on the mooring, the fact was that there was now a two-tier structure to our little society. This would eventually have big implications for the community.  There were those who now had a bigger stake in the place and had had to sacrifice more to attain our new joint-owner status. Only us in the minority had truly progressed to the fifth stage.  We all paid rent to the new management company, but some of us were joint owners of that company. In a sense we charged ourselves rent. Not that that distinction had any benefits to us shareholders for many years, for the company could not afford to pay any dividends on those shares. All the money was going to pay off the bank loan.  In fact we were worse off during those years, as most of us had incurred debt to raise money to form, and invest in, the company initially.

Despite this two-tier system the company policy retained the original ethos of acting in the interests of all the residents.  The BWB calculated its percentage of the rental income by forming its own ‘nominal’ rental rate – as determined by its commercial surveyors. But our management company was not obliged to actually keep in step with this valuation and could review the rental rates every five years as we saw fit – subject to a clause in the residents’ individual leases allowing independent arbitration if they objected to the rate increase.  But in point of fact the company usually charged the residents less than the rate set by the BWB, because of the remaining residue of feeling in the company that, in a sense, the residents were the company and we should all try and keep our living costs as low as possible. The rents were effectively subsidised and the residents were marginally protected from paying the full market value of their moorings.

Our company also acted in the interests of all the residents in other ways. Since the lease the company had with the BWB was much longer than those provided by the previous landlords to the individual residents, we decided to give everyone new leases which were twice as long, at no cost at all to the residents. This added considerably to everyone’s security and to the financial value of the asset each lease represented.  The financial sacrifice to the company this represented was considerable. It meant that we would no longer be in position to recoup some of our investment by selling new leases when the original ones expired.  Yet this fact seem hugely under-appreciated by the non-shareholder residents, who accepted the gift without a murmur of gratitude, for the most part.

The company also put washing machines and driers in the storage facility, all hooked up to water and electricity paid for by the company.  Again, the gift of a free laundry facility was accepted without comment or seemingly much appreciation.  Though we expected the cost of the electricity for this facility to be significant, we were soon staggered by the size of the bills coming in.  In the end we found out that one resident was taking advantage of the situation by taking in dirty laundry from all and sundry and charging for a cleaning service using the free facilities.  It was the most blatant case of free-riding yet and also led to the wearing out of all the machines in less than half the time expected.  The company did not replace the machines and put a coin meter in the electricity line so that residents could put in their own machines while paying for the electricity they used.  The company also put in, at no cost to the residents and surplus to the requirements of the original leases, a sewage pump-out system far superior to what was there before.

After several years more, the sixth stage was reached: the bank loan was paid off, as were the personal loans some of us had had to get. The company started to pay dividends on its shares. It could afford, in fact, to pay each shareholder enough to virtually cover their rent. In effect this meant that the shareholders, as a reward for making bigger financial sacrifices for many years, were now living rent-free.  I started to contemplate that, after all these years, I had come full circle: living on my boat on a rent-free mooring. The only difference was the presence of physical amenities and a piece of paper that meant I could carry on living there securely.  In some ways it seemed like a long and tortuous journey just to secure that piece of paper.

It was not long before the seventh stage was reached. As a result of everyone getting to know that some residents were getting nice dividend payments there gradually developed a rift, at least in some minds, between the shareholders and the other residents. There developed a suspicion that the interests of the two sides did not coincide and that decisions made by the shareholders were not necessarily in the interests of all the residents.  This came to a head during one of the five-yearly rent reviews when a group of ‘rebels’ decided that the proposed increases were unreasonable.  The implication was that the shareholders were a bunch of greedy capitalists out to exploit the rest.  In the event this backfired on the residents as, at the next shareholders meeting, it was decided that, if we are going to be treated as greedy capitalists – despite our assurances to the residents that they, for many years, had been paying below the market rate for their moorings – then we may as well live up to our reputation and stop subsidising the rent at all. A decision was made that henceforth the company would simply pass on the rate as set by the BWB. In the case of an appeal to arbitration it would simply be a case of the BWB’s commercial valuation against the valuation of some other commercial surveyor.  Since the BWB, in any case, outsourced their valuation process to an independent surveyor this arbitration process would almost certainly be pointless.  I remember contemplating that the two-tier system had degenerated into a ‘class war’ and simultaneously feeling that this was the saddest moment in the long evolution of social life on the mooring.

Yet it was also fascinating and illustrative of much that divides the political left and right in their attitudes to Capitalism. For it seemed just that those of us who had shouldered the heavier financial burden for so long, and had taken the risk in the first place, should now be in a position to reap the rewards of that sacrifice.  Yet some of the non-shareholders clearly did not see it that way. They saw that the dividends the company paid ultimately derived from the rental income that they paid, and so regarded the shareholders as somehow unjustly living off their backs.  They had shouldered a lighter burden all along, and taken no financial risks, but somehow now saw themselves as ‘victims’, even though their situation hadn’t changed. It was almost as if, on some unconscious emotional level, they felt that somehow everything should be free; and the fact that it wasn’t led to feelings of resentment and suspicions that they must be being unfairly exploited.  Of course the shareholders saw it differently; not only with regard to having taken the risk and shouldered the heavier burden, but also in light of the fact that all the residents had been shielded from paying the full market rate for their moorings because of actions taken by the shareholders.  From that perspective the non-shareholders had, for many years, been living off the backs of the shareholders. Now it was time for pay-back.

Ironically all this coincided, more or less, with my taking over the position as Managing Director of the company (I had been an unpaid secretary for some years, keeping all the books etc). At a meeting with our accountants I was told that it was time that our company stopped behaving like a residents association and be put on a proper commercial footing. It was recommended that I receive a small salary as MD and that the company stop making unnecessary ‘accommodations’ to the residents. By law a company has to act in the sole interests of the shareholders.  They were, in a timely fashion, echoing what had already happened ‘on the ground’. As for myself, my position improved and the poacher-turned-gamekeeper unexpectedly found himself now Lord of the Manor (or at least a first among equals).

It was with a feeling of resignation that I contemplated the transition to the eighth stage.  Some of the shareholders decided that the time had come to move on with their lives and wanted to sell their boats and their individual mooring lease.  There was no shortage of people interested in buying a boat and place to live on the wharf. But these shareholders, although leaving the wharf, did not want to sell their shares in the company. The yearly dividend represented a good return on the original investment, even though they had had to wait a long time for the returns to flow.  For the first time decisions  about the company and its policy on the wharf were partly in the hands of people who no longer lived at the wharf and were unconcerned with daily life there anymore. Typically they would visit once a year for a shareholders meeting to pick up their dividend cheque.  The mechanics of capitalism had finally divorced the beneficiaries of its working from the interests and motives that had driven it in the first place.  What remained of the leftie in me could not help but feel that there was something wrong with that, though I could easily see myself ending up in the same position.

Now there are several other residential moorings which were set up on the basis that a shareholding in the overall management company went hand in hand with being on the mooring. So that if one sold up and moved away one would be required to sell not just the boat and mooring rights, but one’s shareholding as well. This meant that the affairs of the moorings were always in the hands of the residents. But this could only have evolved from a situation where everyone, at the beginning, invested an equal stake in the formation of the company/co-operative. Starting, as we did, from an unequal position where not everyone was able or willing to contribute to the formation of a management company, it was inevitable in the long run that the divide between shareholding and non-shareholding residents would only widen.

This could be extrapolated to the whole issue of inequality in society generally. How to pursue the value of equality in the face of the widely differing capacities for contributing to society. On the face of it equality is a curious value to hold up as an ideal. After all, no human being is equal to another: not in physical strength or health or longevity, nor in intelligence, nor in physical attractiveness, nor in artistic talents etc, etc. Some degree of redistribution of wealth is obviously required in order to help the most needy; but how to do this without hamstringing the most able in the free exercise of their capacities?  How also, to prevent the inevitable phenomenon of free-riding, where the lazy but cunning find ways of cashing in unjustly on the redistributive mechanism (by feigning need or otherwise)? Should the minority of us who formed and owned the company that actually paid for the lease on our wharf have been forced to give shares to everyone? But then we would all want to join the queue of those getting free shares and the thing could not have got off the ground.  Or should we be prevented from exercising our initiative just so that we would all remain equal, rent-paying tenants?

As it was, as the longest resident of the wharf I could still feel my roots extending back to the days when there was no financial dimension to our desire to live there – other than the desire to be free of financial considerations altogether, living on a then unwanted and unclaimed resource. But now this process of ‘alienation’, as a Marxist would describe it, would inevitably continue with the passage of time and as more shareholders were no longer living at the wharf. The ninth stage was reached when there were more shareholders living away from the mooring, having sold their boat and lease but kept their shares, than there were resident shareholders.  The majority controlling votes at shareholders meetings were now in the hands of people entirely absent from the wharf – again they would visit once a year for meetings to pick up their dividend cheque.  Luckily they had the good grace to allow their votes to go the way the resident shareholders wanted; having once been residents themselves they knew that if there were any issues, it was the residents wishes that mattered most.

At the time of writing, we are now in the tenth stage: some of the shareholdings have been transferred to people who have never lived on the wharf. Yet their dividend income derives from the rents of people living there.   They can have no idea or appreciation of the issues facing those who live afloat. For them, like recipients of share dividends the world over, their shareholdings are just an investment yielding a return.  The ins and outs of how this happens is something of which they are probably completely oblivious. The process of alienation is complete.  I suppose the central question dividing the economic outlook of those on the left from those on the right is: does this count as a case of free-riding?

I am inclined to agree with the mathematician and economist Eric Weinstein who has said that the old distinction between left and right is not as relevant now as the distinction between those who ‘pay their way’ and ‘free-riders’.  Just as it is important to support those in genuine need via a redistributive welfare system, it is also important that those who contribute most to the wealth-generation of the whole society should be entitled to commensurate rewards.  But just as there are those who cynically manipulate the welfare system so as to acquire an income for themselves, received without any exertion on their part, so also are there ‘rent-seekers’ (in the economic theory sense) who seek to manipulate the financial system so as to secure an income stream generated without the need for any further exertion on their part.  Typically it is the ‘squeezed middle’ who end up doing all the real work and who ultimately pay for everything, directly or indirectly.

Interestingly, Weinstein also predicts the need for a much more comprehensive redistributive economic system as Capitalism may start to self-destruct due to advances in technology. He cites the example of the development of driverless cars effectively putting a whole strata of society out of work. I see the point, but on that score I’m more sceptical. As a schoolboy, nearly 50 years ago, I remember being lectured to by a ‘futurologist’ from the University of Surrey who was visiting our school.  He said that the main problem we would face by the time we had reached middle-age was what to do with all our leisure time as technology improved our lives massively and reduced the need to work.  Well we all know the reality that, on the contrary, people seem to need to work harder than ever. There are those who would point to this fact as proof of the nefarious workings of Capitalism always seeking to enslave the majority for the benefit of the few. Who knows, but maybe it also has something to do with a massively increased set of expectations and sense of entitlement…

As regards the mooring, the eleventh stage will be reached when the majority of shareholders are in the position of never having lived on a boat at the wharf. The twelfth and final stage, when none of the shareholders have ever lived at the wharf, can only happen when I am no longer there. Not that I am hanging on just to make sure it doesn’t happen.  To many, my transformation from anarchist hippy to fat, capitalist pig was completed a good while ago. Since I am writing these lines, not on my houseboat on the wharf, but rather overlooking a stunningly beautiful mountain valley scene from the garden of my holiday home in Tuscany, I suppose I will have a job defending myself against the charge. Except to say that since over the decades I have paid far more into the system through taxation on hard-earned income than I have ever received from it, it follows that on balance people are living off my back rather than vice versa. There are also those, like for example some Hollywood celebrities, who ‘own’ many thousand times the value that I do, but nonetheless count themselves as on the progressive left in their political views.  The hypocrisy on these topics knows no bounds.

Some may be tempted to ask whether the long process of social evolution which I have lived through and witnessed has yielded greater happiness in the end.  To which I can only reply that maybe as we grow older, if we are fortunate, we trade some kinds of happiness for others. But if by happiness we mean that which engenders the most vivid and exciting memories, then I suppose it must belong to the early days of fun-filled anarchy.  But I have a suspicion that that had nothing to do with material prosperity or the lack of it, or indeed the freedom from it. Rather, it is, perhaps, simply a function of youth; and that is the secure and enduring property of no-one.