

## André Gorz's Non-Reformist Reforms Show How We Can Transform the World Today

In the 1960s, radical thinker André Gorz developed a novel concept that went beyond the tired reform versus revolution debate. With non-reformist reforms, popular movements can win immediate gains that shift power away from elites — and clear the way for more radical transformations.



André Gorz speaking during an interview in Marian Handwerker's documentary titled *André Gorz*, 1990.

For well over a century, radicals [have debated](#) whether systemic change might come through [reform or revolution](#). Strategists — particularly within the socialist tradition — have disagreed on whether gradual steps might incrementally bring about a new society, or whether a sharp break with the existing political and economic order is required.

During the New Left of the 1960s, Austrian-French theorist [André Gorz](#) attempted to move beyond this binary and present another option. Gorz proposed that through the use of “non-reformist reforms,” social movements could both make immediate gains and build strength for a wider struggle, eventually culminating in revolutionary change. A certain type of reform, in other words, could herald greater transformations to come.

### The Origins of the Non-Reformist Reform

Born Gerhard Hirsch in Vienna in 1923, Gorz immigrated to France in the late 1940s and cultivated a [rich life](#) as an engaged intellectual, immersing himself in the concerns of popular movements and becoming a provocative and sometimes influential voice for several generations of labor, socialist, and environmental activists. In the 1950s, he was a friend and interlocutor of Jean-Paul Sartre, advocating for the strain of existentialist Marxism associated with the storied journal *Les Temps Modernes*, where he served on the editorial committee. In the 1960s, Gorz cofounded a publication of his own, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and was influenced by the ideas of radical educator and social critic

Ivan Illich.

He went on to write pioneering works on ecological politics and, in his eighties, wrote his last book, [Lettre à D.](#) An unexpected critical and commercial success, the volume was an extended love letter to his wife of nearly sixty years, who long suffered from a debilitating neurological disorder. The two ultimately committed suicide together by lethal injection in 2007, having decided that neither wanted to live without the other.



André Gorz and his wife, Dorine. (Wikimedia Commons)

Gorz advanced his idea of non-reformist reforms in one of his early books, [A Strategy for Labor](#) — published in French in 1964 and English in 1967 — as well as in [essays](#) from the same period. In mapping a path forward for social movements, he disagreed with social democrats who believed that the harms of capitalism could be ameliorated simply through electoral politics and parliamentary dealmaking. Yet he also criticized radicals who perennially predicted a revolution that was nowhere on the horizon.

“For at least the past thirty years,” Gorz wrote, “the Communist movement has propagated the prophecy that capitalism would inevitably, catastrophically collapse. In the capitalist countries, its policy has been to ‘wait for the revolution.’ The internal contradictions of capitalism were supposed to sharpen, the condition of the toiling masses to worsen. Inevitably the working class would rise up.”

This did not happen, however — at least not in the way they had envisioned. Instead, by the 1960s, the advanced capitalist world was enjoying a stretch of robust economic growth — [Les Trente Glorieuses](#), or the three glorious decades, as the postwar period became known in France. Capitalism could not cure itself of its “crises and irrationalities,” Gorz wrote, but it had “learned how to prevent their becoming explosively acute.”

Elsewhere, reflecting on an earlier era marked by deep poverty, he observed that “[d]estitute

proletarians and peasants did not need to have a model of a future society in mind in order to rise up against the existing order: the worst was here and now; they had nothing to lose. But conditions have changed since then. Nowadays, in the richer societies, it is not so clear that the status quo represents the greatest possible evil.”

Gorz acknowledged that deep poverty and misery still existed, but only among a fraction of the population — perhaps a fifth. Those suffering most were not a homogenous industrial proletariat ready to come together as a unified force. Instead, they were a diverse and divided collection of people that included the unemployed, small farmers, and elders facing economic insecurity.

Changing times, Gorz believed, called for social movements to adopt a new strategy — specifically, a strategy focused on making concrete gains that could serve as transitional steps toward revolution. “It is no longer enough to reason as if socialism were a self-evident necessity,” he argued. “This necessity will no longer be recognized unless the socialist movement specifies what socialism can bring, what problems it alone is capable of solving, and how. Now more than ever it is necessary to present not only an overall alternative but also those ‘intermediate objectives’ (mediations) which lead to it and foreshadow it in the present.”

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In this approach, transformation would come about “through long-term and conscious action, which starts with the gradual application of a coherent program of reforms.” Fights for these reforms would serve as “trials of strength.” Small wins would allow movements to build power and put them on more favorable footing for the future. “In this way,” Gorz argued, “the struggle will advance. . . [as] each battle reinforces the positions of strength, the weapons, and also the reasons that workers have for repelling the attacks of the conservative forces.”

Gorz did not rule out the possibility — or even the necessity — of a later showdown between workers and capital. But he criticized leftists in France who refused to pursue immediate improvements, lest they weaken workers’ desire for revolution. “These leaders fear that a tangible amelioration in the workers’ condition, or a partial victory within the capitalist framework, will reinforce the system and render it more bearable,” Gorz wrote. Nevertheless, he argued: These fears. . . reflect fossilized thinking, a lack of strategy and theoretical reflection. On the assumption that partial victories within the system would inevitably be absorbed by it, an impenetrable barrier has been erected between present struggles and the future socialist solution. The road from one to the other has been cut. . . . The movement behaves as though the question of power were resolved: “Once we’re in power. . .” But the whole question is precisely to get there, to create the means and the will to get there.

## **Making Change Structural**

What, then, makes up a “non-reformist” or “structural” reform?

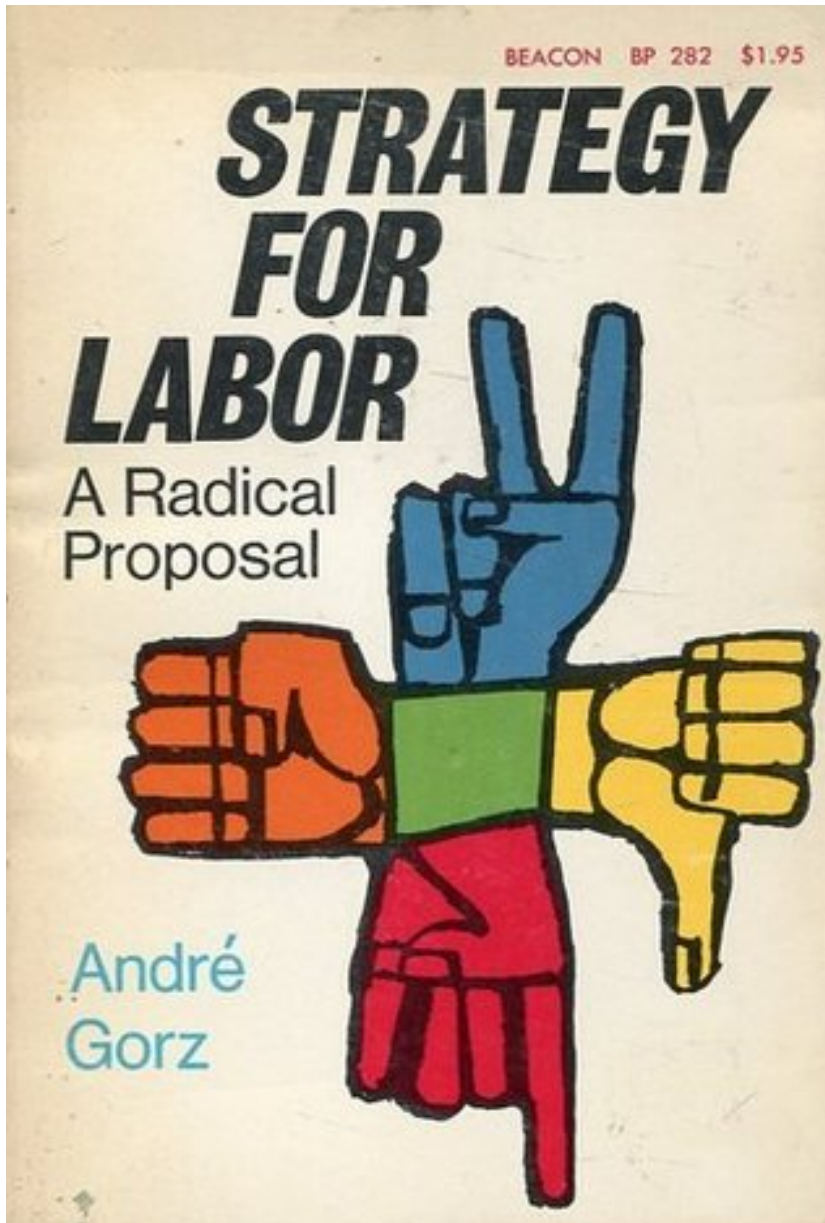
In his most basic formulation, Gorz defines these reforms as changes that are not tailored to accommodate the current system. “[A] not necessarily reformist reform is one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands,” he writes. “A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be.”

Beyond this, Gorz is sometimes ambiguous, and it can be hard to find precise standards in his work for what constitutes ideal demands. Nevertheless, some key themes emerge.

First, an individual demand should be seen as but one step toward something larger. Reforms, he

writes, “must be conceived as means, not as ends, as dynamic phases in a process of struggle, not as resting stages.” They must serve “to educate and unite” people by pointing in “a new direction for social and economic development.” Each reform should be connected to a wider vision of change.

In Gorz’s words, workers’ “partial struggles for jobs and wages, for the proper valuing of human and natural resources, for control over working conditions, and for the social satisfaction of the social needs created by industrial civilization cannot succeed unless they are guided by an alternative social model. . . which gives these partial battles a comprehensive perspective.” Non-reformist reforms should help illuminate the path to that alternative. A socialist program, he remarks, should “exclude neither compromise nor partial objectives, so long as they go in the right direction and as long as that direction is clear.”



In practice, Gorz thought that socialists might often ally with moderate social democrats and liberal reformers, who are apt to see short-term reform as an end in itself. But this makes it all the more important for radicals to be clear about their far-reaching objectives. “The fact that social-democratic leaders and socialist forces may find themselves in agreement on the necessity of certain reforms must never be allowed to confuse the basic difference between their respective goals and perspectives,” he

writes. “If a socialist strategy of reforms is to be possible, this basic difference must not be masked.... On the contrary, it must be placed at the center of political debate.”

Second, Gorz argues that the way a demand is won is as important as the demand itself. Demands must be a “living critique” of existing social relations, not only in content “but also in the way they are pursued.” For instance, a \$1 an hour raise extracted through a bitterly contested strike is very different from an increase arbitrarily handed down by an employer or government functionary. Gorz writes: “Any reform whatsoever — including workers’ control — may be emptied of its revolutionary significance and reabsorbed by capitalism if it is merely instituted by government fiat and administered by bureaucratic controls, i.e., reduced to a ‘thing.’”

Non-reformist reforms, scholar Amna Akbar explains in her [insightful reading](#) of Gorz, “are not in themselves about finding an answer to a policy problem: they are centrally about an exercise of power by people over the conditions of their own lives” — what Gorz calls “an experiment in the possibility of their own emancipation.”

Some critics have argued that the question of how a reform fight is waged is so central that focusing on the content of any near-term demand misses the point. They [contend](#) that while a reform may have greater or lesser benefit, the idea of a “silver bullet” reform with inherently radical potential is a misconception: Any reform itself is not transformative, only the struggle is.

In response, defenders of Gorz’s concept might point to a third trait of structural reforms: Non-reformist reforms are changes that, once implemented, boost popular power at the expense of elite groups. As Gorz writes, these reforms “assume a modification of the relations of power; they assume that the workers will take over powers or assert a force. . . strong enough to establish, maintain, and expand those tendencies within the system which serve to weaken capitalism and to shake its joints.” “Gorz argues that the way a demand is won is as important as the demand itself.”

For Gorz, the quintessential non-reformist reform is one that increases worker control over the production process in a workplace or industry. Today, some activists have pointed to significant changes to labor law — including the repeal of the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 — as reforms that would shift the balance of power. Others have touted single-payer health care as a structural change, not only because it would decommodify an important sector of the economy, but because it would stoke further action.

“Medicare for All doesn’t just offer much-needed and greatly-deserved relief to working people,” [writes](#) author and journalist Meagan Day. “It also increases our ability to intentionally push back against the ruling class. If unions didn’t have to make major sacrifices to protect health benefits, what else could they fight for? If a worker didn’t have to worry about losing health insurance when they lose their job, how much bolder could they be in standing up to their boss? If health care coverage is made independent from employment, how much less power would the bosses have over workers in the economy and in politics?”

In each case, what is at stake is not just a short-term material gain, but also the ability to win more in the future. For Gorz, non-reformist reforms seek to undermine the established order. “Structural reforms should not be conceived as measures granted by the bourgeois State at the end of a compromise negotiated with it, measures which leave its power intact. They should rather be considered as cracks created in the system by attacks on its weak points,” he writes.

A strategy of non-reformist reforms “aims by means of partial victories to shake the system’s equilibrium profoundly, to sharpen its contradictions, to intensify its crisis, and, by a succession of attacks and counterattacks, to raise the class struggle to a greater intensity, at a higher and higher level.”

## The Art of Radical Compromise

The key to putting non-reformist reforms into practice is balancing two difficult realities: first, that compromises can be filled with pitfalls for social movements and therefore must be viewed with caution; second, that refusing to bargain over near-term reforms brings problems of its own, ultimately leading to a dead end. The practitioner of structural reform must walk the precarious line between these truths.

When it comes to the problems of compromise, radicals who warn social movements against cutting deals often point to the dangers of cooptation and of legitimizing the system. While these perils are sometimes exaggerated, the warning is not unfounded. The long experience of social movements has affirmed that reformist compromises, even when they bring real benefits, come at a cost: Fired-up supporters are often demobilized when an incremental gain is won, and sometimes they are never reactivated.

Gains won with the cooperation of elected officials — who inevitably present their smiling faces at ribbon-cutting and bill-signing ceremonies — reinforce the mainstream narrative that those in power are the ones responsible for advancing social change. Movements that are “invited in” to help oversee or administer reforms can lose much-needed talent to inside-game bureaucracy.

As a result, their ability to generate greater pressure from the outside is weakened. Professionalism begins to seep through the ranks, with radical organizers morphing into more comfortable functionaries. Movements, as a time-honored saying holds, go to Washington, DC to die.

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One strength of Gorz’s analysis is that it does not deny such difficulties. Rather, he insists that movements face them head on. The system, Gorz argues, has formidable power to weaken and co-opt reforms, muting their potential to push toward a revolutionary confrontation. “There are no anticapitalist institutions or conquests that cannot in the long run be whittled down, denatured, absorbed, and emptied of all or part of their content if the imbalance created by their initiation is not exploited by new offensives as soon as it manifests itself,” he writes.

And yet, while the possibility of cooptation is real, this outcome is not inevitable. “The risk must be run,” he argues, “for there is no other way.”

Gorz held to this position because he was clear that the consequence of opting out of reform fights is self-isolation. He was critical of “maximalists,” utopians, and dogmatic sectarians, whose insistence on purity removed them from actual struggle. He recognized that putting together a near-term program could not simply be a matter of coming up with the most radical demands possible.

Those pursuing structural reforms, he argued, could not “aim at the immediate realization of anticapitalist reforms that are directly incompatible with the survival of the system, such as the nationalization of all important industrial enterprises[.]” Reforms that would eliminate capitalism outright might be desirable, but the whole point was that workers did not yet have the power to implement these types of changes. “If the socialist revolution is not immediately possible, neither is the realization of reforms immediately destructive of capitalism,” he writes.

Radicals must ask what intermediate steps they will accept, knowing that these are not the fulfillment of their most transformative desires. Using the example of a union in conflict with an employer, Gorz writes that a given win “will not result in the abolition of capitalism. Victory will only lead to new battles, to the possibility of new partial victories. And at each of its stages, above all in its first phase, the battle will end with a compromise. Its path will be beset with pitfalls.” In this process, “The union will have to ‘dirty its hands’” and risk legitimating the power of the boss.

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that all their demands are not satisfied, and they are ready for new battles.”

“We must not hide or minimize these facts,” Gorz insists. And yet the battle brings benefits: “For in the course of the struggle, the workers’ level of consciousness has risen; they know perfectly well that all their demands are not satisfied, and they are ready for new battles. They have experienced their power; the measures which they have imposed on management go in the direction of their ultimate demands (even though they did not obtain complete satisfaction). By compromising they do not renounce their goal; on the contrary, they move closer to it.”

What makes for a worthwhile compromise is not always clear-cut, and Gorz argues that whether a given reform is reformist or not often depends on context. A demand for affordable housing may sound promising, but as we have often seen in the United States, many deals ostensibly created to advance this aim are actually little more than public subsidies for profit-hungry real estate developers, who deploy definitions of “affordability” that leave out all but upwardly mobile professionals.

Among other factors, he reasons, “One would have to decide first whether the proposed housing program would mean the expropriation of those who own the required land, and whether the construction would be a socialized public service, thus destroying an important center of the accumulation of private capital.... Depending on the case, the proposal of 500,000 housing units will be either neo-capitalist or anti-capitalist.”

These ambiguities create difficult dilemmas for movements to confront — questions that cannot be answered in the abstract or resolved outside of the conditions of real-world struggle. The great strength of Gorz’s theory is not that it offers easy answers but that it provides a framework through which we can weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing any given demand or accepting any given compromise. It creates an orientation toward action that forces us to balance revolutionary vision with a hardheaded assessment of present conditions.

In other words, embracing the concept of the non-reformist reform does not free a movement from strategic debates — an outcome that would be neither realistic nor desirable. Instead, its promise is in fostering better ones.