

The problem of mediation

"A post-capitalist society must determine the measure by which it mediates needs, weighs them against each other, and translates them into societal production" (Hermann Lueer, 2026b)

Hermann Lueer has presented a perceptive and methodologically rigorous engagement with our book "Kapitalismus aufheben" [EN: Make Capitalism History] (Lueer, 2026b, own translation). It is refreshing to read a critique that does not stop at superficial polemics but instead raises structural questions regarding societal form. He acknowledges the intent, analytical advances, and results of our theoretical analyses (non-moral approach, utopia of possibility, constitution prior to rupture, critique of the form of mediation, critique of the state). We accept the criticism that it remains unclear how "a stable, transparent, and societally viable mode of production and distribution" is supposed to emerge from commoning and stigmergy—this point is entirely valid and has been raised by other authors as well. From today's perspective, the state of the argument in "Make Capitalism History" (Sutterlütli & Meretz, 2023) must be characterized as rudimentary in this regard. More recent texts attempt to address these shortcomings (see below). However, the focus here is on the critique of the position held at that time; we do not wish to use the excuse that the material is "outdated." Lueer's critique addresses central questions concerning post-capitalist societies in general, making it a particularly interesting topic for discussion. Consequently, this response will take a somewhat broader approach. It will not, however, attempt to fill the gaps from that time—some pointers in this direction can be found at the end of the text, with references to more recent publications. This response focuses primarily on the question of what is fundamentally required for a society-wide system of mediation to function and generate coherence. For that is the question Lueer raises.

Necessities and possibilities

Lueer identifies a theoretical "breaking point" in our argument (ibid.): in his view, we mistakenly define capitalism in terms of a *principle of performance* rather than criticizing *wage labor* as a specifically capitalist form. In reality, the book in question never discusses the principle of performance in isolation; it always speaks of the principle of labor and/or performance—to quote (ibid., p. 22): "Capitalism is based on the principle of labor or performance: I only get a share in society's riches if I accomplish something. Thus, I am forced to contribute to society in the capitalist form: labour for wage." Here, Lueer tears apart elements that, in our view, belong together. He claims that by supposedly dissolving the "specific form [of wage labor] into a general principle of performance," we lose sight of the "crucial difference: the difference between an unconscious, autonomous mediation and a *conscious societal regulation* of the relationship between effort and consumption. Consequently, any form in which *individual contribution* and *individual consumption* are consciously related to one another appears merely as a continuation of capitalist logic" (Lueer, 2026b, emphasis added).

What is Lueer saying here? There is an unconscious and a conscious mediation. Unconscious mediation operates via "wages, money, and the market" and, because it has become autonomous, confronts people "as an external coercion." In conscious mediation, "individual contribution and individual consumption" are, well, consciously related to one another. How exactly, is still unclear. It's worth noting that this concerns societal awareness. This *societally* conscious mediation links contributions and consumption on an *individual level*—only openly rather than covertly. But how else is this conceivable other than through coupling (aka coercion)? Societally, it would be sufficient to bring *all* contributions and *all* consumption into a conscious balance (ideally: equilibrium)—so why should that necessarily have to be the case on an individual level as well? Here, let us quote a key insight from our book that Lueer overlooks: "Although it goes without saying that the contributions needed for the preservation of the society must be met, for the individual, societal necessities increasingly become mere possibilities for action" (ibid., p. 115). From this arises human freedom. Societies that couple social necessities and individual action give less scope to the potential for freedom than would be possible. Capitalism, for example, restricts freedom to consumption, while the sphere of production is characterized by the compulsion to work. Lueer is correct in asserting that the compulsion to work in capitalism is covert and even ideologically disguised as "free choice," but what is gained if work and consumption are now "consciously linked" by a system of labor time calculation? Coercion remains coercion, regardless of whether it is presented to me as a free choice or a conscious decision (Sutterlütli, 2024). And it was this constraint that linked the market capitalism of the supposedly free West with the state capitalism of failed real socialism, and decisively explained the failure of the latter (Sutterlütli, 2025).

Beyond all measure

A central critique of Lueer, derived from the "breaking point," is that communist mediation is "without measure." We tend to "suspend the necessity of a general measure altogether." What does this mean?

In the discussion about post-capitalist alternatives, an old question from the socialist calculation debate of the 1920s is reopened: Does a post-capitalist mediation require a general measure (unit of account, value, price, etc.) or does it use the natural quantities of things themselves (tons, MWh, meters, etc.)? In jargon: unit-of-account vs. in-kind (or in-natura) mediation. Historically, the unit-of-account view quickly gained acceptance, and in practice, both in real socialism and capitalism, money (or price) was the dominant unit of account. What happens when mediation operates via a general unit of account or via multidimensional natural quantities (in-kind)? Let's consider both cases.

With a general unit of measurement, all quantities must be mapped onto this general measure. The quality of the thing is no longer of interest, only its quantity—not a material quantity, but a completely immaterial, abstract measure. This could be a monetary measure (price in euros), but it could also be an abstract measure defined in some other way. Lueer envisions a time measure (working time in hours), others propose an energy measure (energy in watt-hours), but any other measure with a sufficiently general character would also be conceivable (land use, water consumption, CO2 emission equivalents, etc.). The advantages of such a measure are aggregability and comparability: different things can be summarized using the same unit of measurement or compared by means of a direct

comparison. The proverbial apples and oranges then become truly comparable. In this way, "the total societal expenditure can be determined, decisions can be made between competing production alternatives, and priorities can be rationally mediated across different areas," according to Lueer. Is this true? To begin with, the disadvantages are obvious: anything that cannot be expressed in terms of the general metric effectively ceases to exist in the calculation and is consequently excluded from the allocation process. Because comparing apples and oranges is possible in the abstract, it can happen that apples are selected based on the criterion of measurement (e.g., "most time-consuming to produce"), even though oranges are desired. I will discuss shortly why quality should not be completely lost in this process.

If one uses this template, so well-known in capitalism, as the benchmark, everything that deviates from it fares extremely poorly. This also applies to in-kind mediation using physical quantities. Here, everything is considered in its own quality and given or desired quantity: one ton of C45-grade steel, one megawatt-hour of electrical energy from wind power, ten person-days of mechatronics training, a mixed forest with 1000 trees, one thousand hours of physical therapy for rehabilitation after leg fractures, etc. In fact, these examples are still too broad because the context in which the quality is needed in the desired quantity is usually even more specific. Aggregation is only possible within a single quality (total quantity of C45 steel or physical therapy time after bone fractures, etc.). Direct comparisons (e.g., steel with physical therapy) are not possible. On the other hand, almost anything can be expressed in kind—if necessary, even without a quantitative measure, which may sometimes be impossible to determine (e.g., the preservation of a recreation area).

Abstract-general and concrete-general mediation

Lueer writes: "It must be decided which needs take precedence, which modes of production are too costly, and which expenditure is societally justified," and asks "how a highly complex societal reproduction is to be coordinated without a general, explicit measure of comparability." In other words: a quantitative comparison of expenditures is needed to make decisions, and only a general measure enables this comparison. This is an unproven assertion. Lueer can make it because that's how it works in capitalism, thus giving it a superficial plausibility. And it works in capitalism because the increase of the abstract measure is a systemic end in itself, to which all activities are subordinated. Since the purpose (money accumulation) is itself just as abstract as the measure, there is no contradiction. The purpose is embedded in the measure, which consists precisely in being devoid of content; it is mere quantity without the quantity of something. This also applies to seemingly content-based measures such as working time or energy consumption. Similar to money, which originally referred to real gold, units of measurement shed their concrete origin and become mere symbols.

Philosophically speaking, measure and purpose are *abstract generalities*. It is a colossal fallacy to consider a content-free, general measure neutral. The emptiness itself is the content. When transferred to a post-capitalist society, this emptiness also shapes the mediation—a process that ought, in fact, to be oriented toward needs. An abstract, universal measure cannot determine "which needs take precedence, which modes of production are too costly, and which expenditure is societally justified": Only we ourselves can decide the priority of needs; whether a mode of production is too costly can only be determined if the

connection to needs is clear; likewise, which expenditure is societally justified. This cannot be calculated! What is required instead is the inclusion—within the process of mediation—of all qualities relevant to the satisfaction of our needs: this encompasses qualities that can be expressed quantitatively (e.g., a specific volume of construction timber) as well as those that cannot be specified in quantitative terms at all (e.g., the beauty of a landscape). Anything particular, by contrast, is excluded from a process of mediation based on an abstract, universal measure.

Is there an alternative to abstract universality? Yes: *concrete generality*, in which particulars are sublated: “That is to say, the particular does not confront the general as something alien; rather, it is generated by the general itself—it is the general in the form of the particular” (Schlemm, 2012, own translation). Applied to social mediation, this means: the particulars are the diverse human (and more-than-human) needs, while the universal is their societal mediation. If a post-capitalist society is truly to aim at satisfying the needs of all people—without doing so at the expense of the more-than-human world—then these needs must be incorporated into societal mediation rather than being destroyed by an act of abstraction. It is evident that a form of mediation based on concrete universality possesses—indeed, must possess—a character entirely different from the mediation via an abstract, universal standard to which we are accustomed under capitalism. To conceive of this, we must first abandon the *false generalization* inherent in capitalist mediation: the notion that “highly complex societal reproduction cannot function without a universal, explicit measure of comparability” (Lueer, *ibid.*)

Example

How can we envision in-kind mediation? Consider an example within an interpersonal context. An apartment becomes vacant in a housing project comprising several dozen units. Residents have long harbored various desires for a change in living arrangements: some wish to downsize now that their children have moved out; others want more space because their offspring need their own living quarters; still others want to form or dissolve a shared household. The newly vacant apartment enables a “musical chairs” scenario: one move creates new possibilities for others, whose subsequent moves generate further opportunities. A multitude of potential chains of action emerges—but which is the best? One might be tempted to seek an abstract metric—not necessarily monetary, but perhaps something like a calculated “per capita floor area” to which each individual is entitled. Using this, one could calculate the optimal chain of possibilities. However, large apartments sometimes lack separate rooms; furthermore, some people require extra space for artistic pursuits, while others need more maneuvering room for wheelchairs and barrier-free access, and so on. The conclusion: there is no solution—calculable via an abstract metric—that integrates every need. Any abstract, generalized optimization solution systematically overlooks aspects that cannot be captured by the chosen abstract metric.

What might a concrete-general solution look like? In fishbowl sessions, wishes and needs are first identified. Initial solution ideas are considered, scenarios are outlined, and strong and weak path dependencies are identified. After further rounds, several scenarios emerge, none of which ideally covers all needs. New rounds of needs reflection yield second-best options, which in turn enable new scenarios that allow for a higher degree of need satisfaction. After several rounds of mutual awareness of each other's needs and inquiring

about one's own, a scenario emerges that everyone can live with. Or, two acceptable scenarios are identified, from which one is then selected in a process of systemic consent. Creative ideas, such as sharing and co-using living space, have significantly advanced the process. This is commoning.

The outcome is the relatively best solution given the available resources—one where no one is left behind, even if not everyone gets their dream home. Such a result could not have been achieved through abstract, generalized optimization calculations.

In short: scenarios rather than abstract metrics. We can refine our initial definition of the "concrete general" in the context of social mediation: it is not the individual needs as such that constitute the particular, but rather the scenario that encompasses these diverse needs through their specific interrelationships. Typically, multiple such scenarios exist once the scope of possibility expands—and society represents a vast space of possibility. Can the interpersonal commoning seen in this example be generalized to the transpersonal realm? Yes; transpersonal commoning lies at the heart of commonist mediation, and scenarios—along with their optimization on a societal scale—serve as an essential tool. More on this follows below; for now, the aim has been to outline the epistemological foundation.

Dual mediation

Up to this point, we have acted as though a society could choose between mediation based on a unit of account and mediation in kind. In reality, no society can dispense with mediation in kind. It must be clear what is to be produced—and in what quality and quantity—as well as what is required to achieve this, again in terms of quality and quantity. Consequently, capitalism (and, in a somewhat different form, real socialism) involves a dual mediation: one occurring in parallel via a unit of account and the other in kind. According to Marx, the root of this dual mediation lies in the dual character of the commodity and of labor: the commodity is simultaneously an abstract bearer of value and a concrete object of utility—possessing both value and use-value. The labor that produces it shares this duality: it is simultaneously abstract—as the labor time that determines value—and concrete—as the activity that creates a use-value. Under capitalism, the value aspect dominates social mediation and forms the foundation of the unit of account (i.e., money). Yet the utility aspect also plays a role in social mediation, for "nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value." (Marx, 1976, p. 131). Enterprises and end consumers are interested in the concrete characteristics of the goods they buy and consume or process further. Use-value determines mediation in kind. However, this form of mediation is entirely subordinate to the unit of account. It is not what is *needed* that matters; what counts is solely what is *demande*d—that is, both needed and paid for.

In real socialism, the two sides of the dual mediation process were supposed to be planned coherently, but this failed. Why? Theoretically speaking, the persistent, contradictory dual nature of goods and labor worked against socialist goals. While in capitalism individual enterprises plan their own production of goods and then market them, in real socialism total production, including its material flows, was centrally planned and directed. However, the market's value relationships were not simply eliminated, but rather calculated centrally: a

dual planning system. Political objectives were incorporated into this calculation: everyday goods were to be cheap, while luxury goods were to be expensive. Yet, despite politically arbitrary pricing, the overall balance of value was supposed to be correct. This didn't work, however, because the enterprises were equally adept at securing their own special interests. They systematically understated their capacities to the planning authorities in order to gain leeway through "overfulfilling" their plans. The planning authorities were aware of this and systematically set higher production targets. The planning negotiations ultimately resulted in something that produced numerous distortions and externalizations (see below). And the whole thing was rigid, too. So: good intentions, but ultimately unattainable due to the implicit persistence of the law of value. Towards the end of real socialism, this was discussed more or less openly, with the arbitrary political undermining of the law of value being identified as a major cause of the economic decline. With the transition from state-directed to free-market capitalism, the unfettered operation of the law of value and the compulsion to work also returned politically (Sutterlützi, 2025). Now, companies could finally go bankrupt and workers who had previously been kept on could be laid off. The consequences are well known.

Labor time calculation doesn't help

The labor time calculation is a new proposal that aims to do things differently from real socialism: decentralized planning via council structures, a public sector with free access to goods, non-circulating money, and a flat wage for every hour worked. The wage corresponds to the company's profit minus a portion (quasi-taxes) for investments, repairs, public sector subsidies, support for non-working people, etc. I have explained elsewhere how a flat wage ignores differences in qualifications and thereby creates black markets where skilled labor fetches higher prices (Meretz, 2023). Here I am not concerned with internal model contradictions or adherence to the logic of exchange, but with two general points that all approaches share that use a general unit-of-account, of whatever kind (whether real money or non-circulating tokens), for societal mediation.

(1) *A general unit-of-account necessarily leads to externalizations.* Externalization refers to the exclusion of certain areas from the system of mediation. What cannot be mediated is ignored. For example, if environmental protection cannot be represented and managed through accounting, the consequence is environmental destruction through the dumping of production waste into the environment. Contemporary capitalism attempts to counteract this through government measures (laws) or market interventions (pricing of byproducts). It's a futile attempt to play catch-up. The same effect occurs with a model based on labor time calculation. There are many areas where essential needs cannot be represented through calculation. It would be conceivable for an accounting society to decide to allocate labor to these externalized areas in order to integrate them into the accounting system via the required working hours. However, such a product, e.g., environmental protection, would inherently have a societal and unproductive character. No one could individually purchase and consume it. This would mean there would be no revenue to finance production, which in turn would require subsidies from productive sectors. A look at GDR shows that this was exactly the case there. And since there were problems in the productive sectors and people were dissatisfied because they received little for their tokens (aka "GDR-Mark"), the social product of environmental protection was rarely produced. The core argument here is that a unit-of-account system creates two societal production logics: one that can be productively integrated into the system because it produces goods that can be purchased individually and

thus generates revenue, and another that, according to this logic, is unproductive and only represents costs, which is why it must be treated "separately" (through subsidies or other measures). This division of logic leads to the next point: the division of spheres.

(2) *A general unit-of-account necessarily leads to a separation of the spheres of production and care.* Care work involving the interpersonal care of people (children, the sick, the elderly, etc.) is also unproductive. It only costs tokens and yields nothing – unless one wants to put a price on care work to turn it into an individualized commodity, which I don't want to suggest is the case with the labor time calculation approach. Interestingly, Lueer criticizes this in another text (Lueer, 2026a). The obvious idea is to simply pay for individual care work and assign it to the public sector (because it only incurs costs, no revenue) in order to include it in the societal accounting system. Lueer convincingly argues that interpersonal care work produces not a societal, but a private product, which is also consumed immediately by the recipient. This would result in double costs for the accounting system: firstly, wages must be paid without a saleable product (=costs), and secondly, a product is consumed without payment (=missing revenue). The resulting deficit is then transparently deducted from wages.

What appears as a deduction from the variety of purchasable goods in the case of a societal product (environmental protection, see above) manifests as a deduction from wages in the case of a (pseudo-)private product. This will inevitably generate dissatisfaction that cannot be quelled by any amount of transparency or ideology: If I submit to the compulsion to work, regardless of whether it is explained to me transparently or I am coerced into it behind my back, then I also want adequate compensation for my tokens. This is the subject form in capitalism and the engine of growth, but a severe burden for a well-intentioned token society. There is immense pressure to produce sufficient consumer goods, which diminishes the scope for subsidizing the public sector.

Interim conclusion: Every addition of a societal unit of account (the "general measure" demanded by Lueer) divides society into those areas that can be expressed in the abstract, general measure and those that fall outside this scope and must be treated differently. It is an addition because every society is based on in-kind mediation anyway. The resulting double mediation, with the primacy of the unit of account, does not simplify societal organization, but rather complicates it. It does not enable "rational societal reproduction," but rather undermines it—insofar as we measure rationality, i.e., reasonableness, by what benefits all people. A purely quantitative, tokenized internal rationality is a pseudo-reason because it obscures, damages, or even destroys large areas of human and beyond-human life. Lueer's initial claim, that a post-capitalist society must "determine the measure by which it mediates needs, weighs them against each other, and translates them into societal production," can be clearly answered: The measure must be the needs themselves. Anything else, any detour via an abstract, general third option, systematically creates distortions that cannot be reversed.

Is full-in-kind possible?

This conclusion, however, does not absolve us from answering the question of whether complete in-kind social mediation is even possible. If it isn't, then a labor time calculation might well be the best of the available imperfect solutions. Here, our "full in-kind" position

places us at a structural disadvantage in terms of argumentation. We cannot simply present a "simple, uniform" solution for everything, because no such solution exists—nor can it exist (Sutterlütty et al., 2027). What we can do is examine the various societal spheres in order to argue in detail why and how needs-based mediation, which is ultimately in-kind mediation, can function. We also have a structural advantage because we no longer have to deal with the distortions caused by the introduction of an external logic, which all algorithmic accounting approaches, measured against needs, represent (even if this is disputed). Instead, conflicts must be resolved solely in situ, that is, within the same medium of needs. There is no escaping to a third party. Conflicts must be resolved where they arise, and in a structurally inclusive manner. Is this possible? We believe it is, and in the following, we would like to offer some insights (with references) into various areas. We are guided by individual critiques that have given us important impetus for reflection, and for which we are very grateful. At the end of each paragraph, we refer to a source in which we discuss the question in more detail (please ask us if necessary, as the sources are usually not yet online).

(1) *Reproduction*: A system of full in-kind mediation presupposes the abolition of the separation between the "public-productive" sphere of wage labor and the "private-reproductive" sphere of unpaid care work. This can only be achieved by freeing all activities from the logic of wages and thus from coercion. Care work and the production of goods are then structurally equal in societal planning. However, the capitalist legacy, which remains highly influential during the transformation phase, must be viewed critically. Nevertheless, special rewards would once again subject the care sector to harmful pressures for efficiency. Time-based documentation, on the other hand, can be a useful tool for making the real temporal weight and thus the societal significance of care work visible and for negotiating a fair distribution. Since patriarchal structures are deeply rooted in subject formation, the transformation must also extend beyond economic issues and actively challenge power dynamics in private relationships. A crucial lever here is the radical deprivatization of care work through communal housing and infrastructure projects that replace the isolated nuclear family. This would allow for the achievement of a feminist-commonist economy in which all needs are considered in an integrated, democratic planning process (Dornis et al., 2026).

(2) *Production chains*: Production chains require coordinated alignment between numerous production units. To avoid alienation, planning, based on the principle of subsidiarity, takes place as close as possible to the actual production process. Larger networks can delegate planning tasks to specialized meta-commons, while preserving the autonomy of individual companies. Control is based on real variables such as labor, materials, and energy to prevent ecological and social damage resulting from externalization. Since this objective-based planning is complex, digital networks and democratized planning tools serve as the necessary technological foundation (see below). By foregoing central command structures while simultaneously providing open access to data, transparent insight into the entire production chain is enabled for all participants. Ultimately, the needs of the people and the environment affected are directly incorporated into a collective self-regulation of the economy through deliberative processes (Aigner et al., 2026; Meretz & Sutterlütty, 2025).

(3) *Information problem*: The information or knowledge problem has been considered a classic issue since Hayek (1945). It posits that only local actors possess the context-specific

knowledge required for rational economic action, and that, consequently, only a market can convey this local knowledge via prices. With so-called AI, this dogma could be history. It could, because it presupposes the socialization and disclosure of all operational data, which can only result from the socialization of the means of production and the transition of enterprises (including AI systems) into collective control—that is, into commons. Then we could ask a communist AI: "What would it mean for the individual sectors if we globally adhere to the 1.5-degree target? Suggest five scenarios." And with the scenario approach (see 5), these suggestions can be evaluated and their feasibility assessed (Meretz, 2026).

(4) *Polyinstitutionality and polycentrality*: The polyinstitutional and polycentral planning approach attempts to overcome the weaknesses of both rigid, centralist models and purely emergent self-organization. Instead of relying on a single dominant institution, the model is based on a networked architecture in which "meta-commons" function as flexible coordination nodes. Centrality and decentralization are not absolute opposites, but rather institutionally mediated relative positions within a network that are combined differently depending on requirements. Global challenges and sectoral frameworks are negotiated at higher levels, while the day-to-day operations of production and needs-based fulfillment remain self-organized in semi-autonomous, local commons. This fractal structure makes the system highly adaptable and resilient to local disruptions without sacrificing the necessary social cohesion. The goal is an institutional pluralism that accommodates diverse social needs and places democratic self-determination at its core (Sutterlütli et al., 2027).

(5) *Scenario approach*: Scenario optimization serves as a tool for in-kind planning under uncertain conditions. It replaces classical, probability-model-based forecasts with the evaluation of real, historical observational data ("scenarios") that cover both normal and extreme events. The approach mathematically determines a solution that functions robustly across all selected scenarios, with the stringency of the safeguards defined by a specific risk threshold. A key advantage is that the guarantees remain valid regardless of the probability of individual scenarios occurring, as long as these scenarios have not been excluded. This approach does not require a complete model of the world, but merely adequate observation. While mathematics ensures the robustness of the planning, substantive questions—such as the selection of relevant scenarios and the weighing of trade-offs—remain in the hands of the relevant commons structures (ibid.).

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