



Alternatives to neo-liberalism: Towards greater social and ecological justice

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review of

Parker, M., G. Cheney, V. Fournier and C. Land (eds.) (2014) *The Routledge companion to alternative organization*. London and New York: Routledge. (HB, pp. 386, £185.00, ISBN 9780415782265).

Introduction

This book – re-issued as a paperback in September 2018 – engages with alter-capitalist tropes of thoughts that envisage possibilities of pathbreaking socio-economic transformations in a world where everything is subsumed under the pervasive hegemon of global capital. It begins by drawing our collective attention to the bizarre fact that despite the Great Recession that happened in 2008, different forms of global capitalisms continue to be portrayed as the ‘only game in the town’ and through the course of 24 comprehensively crafted chapters, the book problematizes this univalence of the unchallenged paradigm of global capital. This is done to subvert the monological narrative that ‘[u]nbridled growth, trade liberalization and ruthless competition’ are the ‘only or best ways of organizing the contemporary world’ because ‘the reality is capitalism has always been contested and that people have created many other ways of providing for themselves.’ [iii] This book therefore, explores economic and organizational alternatives that transcend far beyond the narrow imaginations of economists and organizational theorists and focuses on innovative modes of cooperatives, communes, community currencies, scrounging, co-housing, etc., to reiterate that another world is not only possible through non-conventional and non-capitalo-

centric ways, but is already in practice through such alternative modes of organizations. The book desists from merely complaining about the present and relies more on offering new avenues for the future by furnishing a critical analysis of contemporary global capitalism that can lead to our engagement with forms of politics by other means that relies more on values of solidarity, freedom and responsibility. In the process of doing this, the book gives voice to modes of new organizing templates that remain unrepresented or marginalized in conventional political studies but which in fact can have significant contributions in achieving social and ecological justice. Corporate globalization has brought the planet earth and the lives of millions of people on it to the brink. Assessing the devastation caused by global capital, Vandana Shiva, noted environmentalist and ecological activist who wrote the preface to the book, rightly observes that 'Climate extremes are an environmental externality of a fossil fuel based, capital driven economy. We must find alternatives both because oil is running out, and because climate chaos has become a major threat to our survival.' [xxii] Keeping this in mind, this book seeks to look for alternatives:

to protect the earth, to generate creative meaningful work, and provide more and better food... and... the seeds of these alternatives are being sown everywhere, and form a vital part of the contest between an ecocidal and genocidal system, and alternative ideas which are attempting to create Earth Democracy to protect the freedom of humans and all species. [xxii- xxiii]

In the beginning, the book discusses the promises and glaring failures of advanced capitalism and subsequently we are given a thorough account of possible alternatives to liberalization. The initial section on 'Alternatives: Past, Present and Prospective' contains definitional understandings of capitalism as provided by luminaries such as Boal et al. (2005), Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), and Harvey (2011), who enunciate the bloody and aggressive accumulation drives of capitalism and also talk of active past, present or prospective deviational methods from capitalism such as 'collectivism', 'de-growth', 'Kibbutzim', 'The Diggers', 'partnership', 'autonomism', 'gift exchange', 'social economy', 'Occupy', 'social accounting', 'the commons', 'permaculture', 'microfinance', and 'credit unions'. The subsequent chapter on 'Imagining Alternatives', written by Geoff Lightfoot, also incorporates the issue of 'prefigurative politics' [39] to materialize the possibility of non-conventional ways of finance and organizing.

While they talk of alternatives, the book does not claim to provide 'out of the hat' solutions to the crisis that plagues the world today. In the words of the editors:

This is not a utopian book... it is more like a recipe book, in which the chapters function to provide some ideas and inspiration by documenting the history, current state and future possibilities of alternatives to market managerial

capitalism. With a recipe book, you are not told what to make, but are encouraged to think that you don't need to keep on eating Chicken McNuggets. Other ideas are available. [40]

In explicating those alternative ideas, the book maps, in the span of 24 chapters, the cartographies of different models of innovative organizing and living that pose a strong challenge to the narrative of the indispensability of global marketocracy. The book is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the theme of *laissez faire*, its devastating fall out and the necessity for a change in ideas, and the subsequent sections focus on work and labour, exchange and consumption, and resources. Under the thematic heading of these different sections, the book incorporates chapters that bring to the fore varied alternative modes of sustenance, economic management and political or social organizations such as worker recuperated enterprises, communes and intentional communities, non-commodified labour, fair trade, complimentary currencies, eco-localism, alternative and social accounting, credit unions, and people-led education. The very titles of these concepts testify to their non-capitalist characteristics and the editors bring under a single volume a compendium of essays that enunciate a wide range of modalities for a new world.

At the very outset, the editors define what capitalism is and we are also told of its well-known central objective, namely the primitive accumulation of wealth. This has been made possible through the process of division between labour and the means that resulted not only in the alienation between the assets that go into the production of outputs and the actual product but eventually to a division between humans and their humanity. This gives birth to reification, 'alienation, anxieties and insecurity' [10]. The second chapter enunciates these aporias of capitalist accumulation to build a logic of deconstruction of the liberalized view of life by addressing various forms of non-commodified labour like slavery and domestic labour as an integral part for the functioning of a capitalist society. These inner contradictions of capitalism that allows it to accommodate non-commodified forms of labour within its pervasive logic of universal commodification inevitably erode its fundamental claims. Chapter three emphasizes the fact that all forms of organizing are political and towards the end of this chapter, the author stresses the importance of reflexive organizing to inaugurate alternative imaginaries of organizations. Such constant questioning and evaluation of organizational *a priori*s is of the utmost importance for the sustainable development of everyone. After three chapters the book starts with a new section – work and labour. Chapter four provides an exhaustive account of cooperative enterprises and 'horizontalized decision-making and labor process' [57] and elaborates on the Argentinian experiment in ERT (*empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* or worker-recuperated enterprises) and in doing that it analyses the:

[T]heoretical challenges and empirical underpinnings of workers' self-management... the chapter theorises self-management as rooted in class-based actions and struggle... practices of self-management are rooted in the spontaneous, 'bottom-up' and direct actions of workers struggling to go beyond the typically exploitative, and authoritarian nature of the capitalist workplace. [48]

Workers' struggles and transformative self-management models are referred to here to establish these points. The 'dual realities' of self-management of the Argentinian ERTs are brought to focus when the authors note:

[O]n the one hand... ERTs must attempt to maximize production and revenues as much as possible within competitive markets... on the other hand, they must also take into account the social and solidarity objectives and values of the cooperative. [55]

In a similar vein, the following chapter discusses the merits of the 'rise of co-operativism and worker co-operatives today' [64], addressing worker co-operative values, incentives and different types of co-operatives that are in practice today in various parts of the world. The logic that gets explored here is the democratization of the economy through an alternative model of co-operative organization of finance. Such an alternative economy would be broader and more human and ecology friendly. The authors note:

A system of self-governing enterprise would not of course, eliminate conflicting interests, goals, perspectives, and ideologies among citizens. But it would tend to reduce the conflict... give all citizens a nearly equal stake in maintaining political equality and democratic institutions in the governance of the state. [84]

Closely connected to the idea of solidarity co-operatives are 'communes' and 'intentional communes' [89] that thrive on the ethos that 'cooperation is key to human survival' [90]. The chapter on communes reminds us that 'only since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Global Capitalism has competition supposedly supplanted cooperation in human consciousness and made cooperative communities seem like alternatives to the norm' [*ibid.*]. The section on Micro-philanthrocapitalism in this chapter enlightens us about alternative organization in the kinship community of Ndem in Senegal that offers a holistic approach to community development.

Optimistic communitarians can foresee a bright community-oriented future of non-violent, humanitarian, agriculturally based but market engaged sustainable lifestyles in which conflicts are resolved amicably and people are also freed from destitution. Community based practices that were in use in the 1960s and 70s are being reused today.

The book also engages with issues of non-commodified labour, domestic labour and immigrant workers. Migration has been inevitable in a world of transnational capital and cross-border trade and therefore a cosmopolitan notion of migration should be the norm. As the authors note, alternative forms of immigration organization ‘fashions positive forms of sociality, culture and politics, grounded in a vision of human worth beyond narrow nation state membership’ [147]. Discussing non-borders brings us to the world wide web and global social media networks that blur all national demarcations. The chapter exploring these ideas refers to ‘biolinguistic capitalism’ or the social production of values under social media network impacts and possibilities of resistance through alternative media actors, arguing that:

At stake is not simply the role of real-time media in processes of organization, but a politics of anonymity that acknowledges the central role of algorithmic actors in the constitution of collective agency. By algorithmic actors we mean the grammar, rules or parameters of code which can shape the organization of people and things... just like organizing, code has political effects... the question of anonymity is at the heart of an emergent politics of information governance, addressing the role of protocols, policies and practices in systems of networking. [151-152]

If we can have future trajectories of political subjectivities through social networking assemblages and hacktivism, we can also supplement such alternative political subject formations with radical ideas of non-commodification. The political economy of capitalism primarily relies on the principle of exchange or exchange value of commodities, and in the next section of the book we come across utopian ideas and practices of *non-exchange* and *non-consumption*. In other words, we encounter an unmasking of the basic political economic fundamentals of global capitalism, namely exchange values, primitive accumulation drives and global consumption. The chapters on fair trade, social justice, and production alternatives belie the basic claims of capitalism. Fair trade operates both ‘in and against the market’, working through market channels to ‘create alternative commodity networks for items produced under more favourable social and ecological conditions, and simultaneously working against the conventional market forces that create and uphold global inequalities’ [167]. Fair trade can also achieve better growth and alternative production dynamics. Another revolutionary but pragmatic form of counterculture against the theory of conventional exchange is the emergence of the notion of ‘complementary currencies’ [182]. In recent times, the authors show, we have seen a ‘mushrooming of complementary currencies such as Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETs), electronic... currencies and local scripts circulating in small towns’ [182]. Defying the hegemonic grammar of capitalism, myriad counter-currents of alternative life styles are being practised across the globe as expressed in the chapters on gifting and gift economy, and voluntary simplicity. All these

ideas dislodge the supremacy of liberalized claims that people are prone only to consumption and accumulation and therefore connecting to the developmental and mass production bandwagon is the only gospel that exists. Taking a leaf out of that alternative vision, the chapter on bio-regional economy argues for the replacement of global capitalist economy with 'self-reliant local economies' or 'bioregions' because:

Economic growth, the shibboleth of capitalist economies, cannot be compatible with sustainability, and that finding ways of divorcing growth from energy and resources, known as 'decoupling' cannot be practically achieved. [220]

The idea of bioregional economy runs counter to state-controlled and market-controlled systems of productions and believes in revolutionary notions of 'reclaiming control of resources' [226] and 'self-provisioning' [232] that substantiate the wide benefits of bioregional economies or 'eco-localism' [236].

Going through these chapters the reader is likely to be struck by the cavalcade of new ideas that forge a feasible alternative to our pre-existing concepts of socio-economic organization. Such notions can be translated into reality if we have alternative resources to sustain us, and this is the focus of the final section of the book. All these experimental ideas are in practice now, in different places across the globe, and the dystopic reality of ecocide and mass poverty or gross inequality unleashed by capitalism is vigorously challenged by such pre-figurative ideas of sustainable resource mobilization. The book's focus here on various new social movements to this effect also testifies the rise of pre-figurative radical political imaginaries that talk of alternative politics and organization.

What are the takeaways then from the book? If we situate the book in the epistemic climate of Anthropocene and global ecological crisis, it emerges as a great contribution to future thinking and the bottom line that we gather here is, cooperation should have stayed the norm rather than competition because unprecedented economic growth is causing unprecedented deterioration of the human and environmental condition. Consciousness about the prime significance of natural resources in the subsistence of living things and their immediate physical component is needed and 'microphilanthrocapitalism' emerges here as a viable alternative that can be thought upon for future. The section on exchange and consumption transcends mere economic grounds and perceives consumption and exchange from broader social and environmental perspectives. Maintaining a balance between the commitment to market, nature and society is difficult but that is what the book professes through all its varied sections. Due to the delocalization of production for cost cutting purposes, and high levels of production and consumption, the environment is suffering as is set out clearly in the first chapter which argues that the levels of ecological footprints

have also multiplied. As stated in chapter 15, this is also partly because people do not feel they have a stake in the ecological effects, proposing the idea of a system of economy that focuses on the individual's relation with their communities and the natural world rather than the market through relocalizing production and economy and taking responsibility for one's own resources and emissions. The discussion on 'eco-localism' also points to the friction between the goal to achieve environmental results and regulating democratic processes.

The final part of the book also fosters the notion of collective ownership of resources so that compatibility between the ideology of the organization and its assets can be maintained. Even the crux of competition as happens in banks can also be created on the basis of a collective agreement. Resources belonging to a community can well be seen as a platform for alternative values and practices, as discussed in detail in chapter 19. What is needed to be understood is that we need to grow our resources, independent of the market or other chains of command. The chapters offer fascinating insights into the dynamics between means and ends, and innovative people-centric and earth-centric technology that can be termed as prototypes of ecological technology, that may assist.

The book ends by way of a self-assessment, measuring the potentialities as well as the inefficiencies of the alter-capitalist modes analyzed through the chapters. The concluding section named revisits the initial claims and objectives of the book and reexamines the propositions made in the various chapters on alternative modes of organizations and in doing that it raises the all-important question of whether the very alternatives themselves are inscribed within the circuits of global capital. Boltanski and Chiapello's seminal work, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) is referred to here to signify that the new mechanisms of global capital can appropriate the very voice of discontent that threatens to destabilize capitalism. The book therefore, ends by reiterating the towering challenges that any form of alter-capitalist modes would encounter while attempting to subvert the global domination of liberalization and by acknowledging the challenges it ends in reposing hope in the transformative vectors of future thinking and alternatives. The editors admit that it is ultimately a mere book and hence cannot claim to take on the supranational might of *laissez faire*, and neither does it claim to do that but it surely achieves to forge a plank of non-*a priori* thinking that can transform our future.

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