

Book Review

Rob Harrison (ed.) (2013)

People Over Capital: The Co-operative Alternative to Capitalism.

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With the economic crisis of 2008, ferocious austerity, rising inequality and the threat of global warming, this book poses a timely question: “Is there a co-operative alternative to capitalism?”. Following submissions to the *Ethical Consumer* magazine in 2012, Rob Harrison selected the fourteen best article submissions to that question, and categorised them into six separate chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular theme, namely: the history of (largely British) cooperatives; cooperative economy; open source and new global networks; the relationship to a sustainable future; alliances with the wider economic forces; and the limitations of the cooperative movement. Harrison then gives his own summary to the fairly wide range of issues and opinions brought forward by the fourteen submissions.

The appeal and significance of this book permeates far beyond the limitations of the cooperative movement from which it originates. The United Nation’s designation of 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives occurred within the context of the existing set of crises already mentioned. Questions of not only “how?” to replace capitalism, but also “what with?” are becoming mainstream, particularly following the failure of many proposed alternatives from Soviet Socialism to Social Democracy. The book fits comfortably within this discourse, and offers an exciting overview to certain issues which are being picked up by other authors. Nic Wistreich’s essay on open-source capitalism, for example, deals with many of the same issues being discussed in other major works.

It is also important to note that this book was written within the context of a continuous global decline in the trade union movement, and so this publication must be read within a new and emerging discourse discussing the role of cooperatives as a strategic tool within a wider labour movement. The cooperative movement is shown here, at least within the parameters of this book, as beginning to formulate not just theoretical, but also strategic methods for overcoming or replacing capitalism. This therefore makes this book of explicit interest to the union movement, labour activists and their social movement allies, and is perhaps of particular benefit to those looking for a decent, comprehensive overview or introduction to these general themes.

The Methodology is varied from essay to essay. Some texts are academic and others more rhetorical, but Harrison’s intention has clearly been to provide a fairly detailed cross-section of a variety of positions regarding the central question of whether or not cooperatives can replace capitalism. The various submissions do not represent a clear impression of the entire discourse within the

movement but rather a particular (if not majority) section within it, a reality which the book successfully displays. Consequently, there are a number of underlying assumptions presented within the book, which can be listed as follows:

- Cooperatives are not simply a particular business structure, but represent values which are fundamentally counterpoised to capitalism.
- Cooperatives have a transformative power, but how and if this power is used remains a key point of contention.
- Cooperatives represent a better form of economic organisation than traditional businesses, regardless of their limitations generally.

The first section of the book attempts to balance the history of the cooperative movement with current existing “opportunities”. To the credit of Murray, Ellwood and Mills, the history is explored only briefly in their essays. The early co-ops of the 1840s did not face the imminent threat of environmental catastrophe or market downturns as severe as the great depression or the 2008 financial crash, as noted in the Mills submission: “...with a growing world population, and a global economy whose entire objective is growth ... the future looks fragile ... but the future is in our hands” (p. 49). Many practical issues are presented throughout this section, such as issues of access to funds and the tendency of cooperatives to “degenerate” into hierarchical organisations. In these opening articles, several questions are developed which set the stage for the following submissions. One of the great strengths of the book is Harrison’s placement of the essays under the relevant headlines in the particular order he chose. While this can be tricky, especially because the authors had no contact with each other or any intention of discussing separate issues in any sequence, the sections address key questions relatively systematically in the order that the reader begins to ask them.

It seems right, then, that the second section deals with how a new cooperative economy might look. This is perhaps one of the most significant sections of the book. Here, a conception of cooperatives as being capable of replacing capitalist markets is pitted against the accusation that they result in “worker run capitalism”, or that their cooperative values are limited to internal structures. Orthodox or not, Mills’ conclusion in the first text that “there is no imminent prospect of a co-operative alternative to capitalism” certainly impresses upon the discourse these very dangerous possibilities. Dan Gregory “responds” by arguing the potential of cooperative bodies to act as “a stepping stone to a transformation of the relationships not only within but between the sectors”, describing this as “an alternative to capitalism” (p. 71). The labour activist James Doran goes further, stating that “The co-operative and trades union movements must unite in favour of co-operatism” (p. 100), and imagines an alliance to bring the entire economy under direct workers’ control.

Bold proposals such as these may not be convincing within the limited size of the essays, but further attempts to solve climate change and financial crashes through cooperatism at the very least challenge traditional or dogmatic narratives such as nationalisation versus privatisation. Proposals by Robbie Smith for an alternative or by Nic Wistreich to build from open source clash to some extent with Doran’s more traditional trade union analysis, but these contradictions are honestly presented and, rather than creating confusion, serve to give the book a wider appeal.

The Afterword attempts, perhaps rather awkwardly, to compile twenty points of agreement

from the fourteen essays presented. Some of these, such as Point 8 which calls for political parties to be “organised like cooperatives” are fairly broad. Perhaps these twenty points could be further summarised into a few “core” points of agreement.

For example, several of these points discuss the numerous objectives of the cooperative movement, such as changing local consumer patterns, altering environmental standards and reconfiguring the economy on the values of supporting citizens rather than on profit or growth. Harrison is attempting to convey his personal idea that co-ops generally succeed at these things to a greater extent than capitalist businesses, and also that they have the transformative capacity to spread these values to wider society and thus ultimately to transform economic and social relations.

Other points can be conglomerated under a second theme, which deals with the issue of external political demands of the co-ops. This is raised repeatedly throughout the text, particularly the need for government support for cooperatives, including reduced regulation for establishing cooperatives, state subsidy and other tax incentives.

The remaining points can be grouped together as a set of internal proposals for the movement – forming greater networks of mutual support between small localised co-ops, developing a unified policy regarding environmental standards, entering into alliances with social movements, and becoming truly multinational in order to survive within a globalised capitalist economy.

One of the pitfalls of a compilation of essays is that the authors may begin to repeat points somewhat disjointedly. Further to this, many exciting issues frequently raised within the essays are given only a token mention or cursory overview and are not explored in significant detail; this means that a reader hoping for a detailed understanding of a particular issue, such as British tax laws in relation to cooperatives, will not find this book very useful. Some submissions are slightly over-rhetorical, using terms such as “evil” or “unjust”, or make unsubstantiated assertions.

That said, a serious strength of the book is that it functions well as an introduction to readers who may not be familiar with the cooperative movement. It not only details the movement far beyond the UK context which it directly addresses, but also gives exciting and contextually relevant strategic proposals from a variety of different positions. It provides an honest account of the successes and failures of such strategies, as well as credible suggestions for overcoming them, and gives a rather holistic account of the movement, with a cross-section of opinions that are, at the very least, thought-provoking and radical.

It is an excellent starting point for developing a detailed understanding of the cooperative movement in the UK, but is also (or ought to be) of particular interest to those involved in similar social movements - non-governmental organisation, trade unions and other social actors. This book provides an important and timely reminder that there are new and significant challenges to modern capitalism emerging, and that we need to take every idea seriously.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DAVID O’CONNELL is a recent graduate from the Global Labour University in Germany. Originally a labour activist from the United Kingdom, for the past four years he has been an active member of the German public and service sector union Ver.di. Prior to his studies, he was leading an effort to establish a works council in a small company and participating in its operation.

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