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Book Review

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Co-operatives in a Post-Growth Era: Creating Co-operative Economics. Edited by Sonja Novkovic & Tom Webb. Zed Books/Fernwood Publishing: London, UK/Halifax, NS, 2014. 312 pp. ISBN 9781783600779.

Co-operatives in a Post-Growth Era features a collection of articles that call for a new economy where the “growth-at-any-cost” doctrine of neoclassical economics is replaced with co-operation for the sake of all people and our planet. The book is an outcome of the *Imagine 2012: International Conference on Co-operative Economics* that took place in October 2012 in Québec City, Canada, one of the events marking the UN’s International Year of Co-operatives. The editors of the book, Sonja Novkovic¹ and Tom Webb,² are pioneers and leading figures in the field of co-operative economics both in Canada and internationally.

In their introduction to the book, Novkovic and Webb distinguish co-operative enterprises from investor-owned businesses based on four key elements: (1) the purpose of the business (meeting the needs of communities and people versus maximizing return-on-investment); (2) values (co-operation, solidarity, reciprocity, and trust versus greed and competition); (3) principles (common ownership and collective decision-making versus centralized ownership and decision-making); and (4) founding ethics centred on fairness or social justice (genuine concern for human well-being and ecological sustainability versus economic return at the expense of all else). Accordingly, and fuelled by the four key elements identified above, they set out to answer the following question: is there a co-operative advantage in addressing the ill-doings of the neoclassical economic doctrine at the macro level *and* in doing business at the micro level? The book’s 14 chapters, presented in two parts, are brought together with the goal of answering this question. Part 1 is entitled “What is the New Economy and Why Do We Need It?” and Part 2, “Co-operatives and the New Economy.” Each part comprises seven concise and well-researched chapters, written by some of the world’s leading scholars on co-operative economics.

Part 1’s chapters aim at debunking neoclassical perspectives on the economy in order to make the case for a new, “post-growth economy.” Contributors, in turn, argue that neoclassical attitudes to wealth (Manfred Max Neef, William Rees, Peter Victor, John Fullerton) and prosperity (Neva Goodwin, Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett) uphold the “growth-at-any-cost” economic doctrine, which has not only resulted in financial and economic crises on a global scale, but also in converging ecological, social, and humanitarian crises for the first time in human history. As a solution, contributors to Part 1 advocate for the transition of the global economy into a post-growth era, where the unceasing pursuit of short-term economic benefits is subdued to the well-being of human beings and the planet.

Part 2 focuses exclusively on the co-operative business model and its potential role in spearheading a transition toward a new economy that could address the converging crises caused by the growth-at-any-cost doctrine of



neoclassical economics. Part 2 includes both theoretical and empirical work dedicated to exploring the co-operative advantage in five main areas: economic productivity (Morris Altman, Vera Zamagni, Stephan Smith & Jonathan Rothbaum, Claudia Sanchez-Bajo), resilience during times of economic turmoil (Sanchez-Bajo, Altman, Smith & Rothbaum), enhancing human health and well-being (David Erdal), reclaiming the commons (Barbara Allen), and cultivating a paradigm shift that is necessary for a transition toward a post-growth economy (Stefano Zamagni).

Based on the arguments from Part 2, Novkovic and Webb conclude that the four key elements of the co-operative business model provide co-operatives the edge to succeed in a highly competitive market *and* the tools to lead the economic and ideological shift necessary for addressing the greatest converging crises in human history. While all seven articles in Part 2 are well argued and concisely written, they are all supportive articles by co-operative advocates. Here the book could have been enriched by incorporating some illustrative neoclassical or Marxist perspectives critical of co-operatives to remind readers of the ongoing debates in economic theory and to strengthen the case for co-operative economics by putting it to the test of contending views. Given, however, the overly critical view of co-operatives proffered by neoclassical and some Marxist economic literatures, the editors can be forgiven for contributing a much-needed counterargument in strong support of not only co-operative firms but, most evocatively, for a broader co-operative economy.

As for a game plan in transitioning to a more co-operative economy, Novkovic and Webb call on co-operatives to enlarge their share in the total economy through solidarity building, both among themselves and with other social and economic networks that support co-operative values. While the editors are very optimistic about the role co-operatives can play in the transition to a post-growth economy, they rightly remind readers that co-operatives operate within the highly competitive capitalistic economy, where they are subjected to pressures of co-optation. They warn co-operatives to not compromise from their collective values and practices in the face of such pressures; after all, as Novkovic and Webb contend, it is those very values and practices that provide co-operatives with the competitive edge to succeed in a highly competitive market.

Prior to making a statement of such ambition, the book could have benefitted from further elaboration into the theory and practice of “co-operative economics.” If, for instance, “co-operative economics” intends to replace the neoclassical *approach* to capitalism instead of capitalism *itself*, capitalistic social relations could end up being reproduced, if under a more “human” guise. This is due to the fact that co-operatives, in and of themselves, may not eliminate or even challenge the root causes of our converging crises: the unfettered extraction of surplus labour and natural resources inherent in capitalism. Moreover, as Novkovic and Webb themselves point out, co-operatives may mimic the practices of hierarchical enterprises due to capitalistic market pressures. Therefore, an increase in the number of co-operative enterprises would not wholly address our converging crises; only a new economic system based on co-operative values can. However, as it stands, it is unclear if the book proposes “co-operative economics” as an alternative economic system based on co-operative values or as a method of increasing the share of co-operative enterprises within the global capitalistic economy.

Nevertheless, the book goes a long way in building on and contributing to a rich body of literature on co-operatives that focuses on their economic productivity and resilience (i.e., Birchall & Hammond-Ketilson, 2009; Logue & Yates, 2005), human well-being (i.e., Erdal, 2011; Restakis, 2010), and how they can potentially spearhead an ideological and practical transition toward a more equitable and ecologically sustainable society more broadly (i.e., de Peuter & Dyer-Witford, 2010; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014). Thus, the unique and perhaps most valuable contribution of this book is its focus on co-operatives’ potential for taking a leading role in the economic and ideological transition necessary for addressing the greatest converging crises in human history.

Overall, despite its minor shortcomings, *Co-operatives in a Post-Growth Era: Creating Co-operative Economics* communicates in a successful and accessible manner how co-operatives can play a significant role in the development of a more collaborative, compassionate, and ecologically harmonious way of collective living. It is an intellectually stimulating and inspiring resource that I would recommend to scholars, students at all levels, and the general public alike.

NOTES

1. Sonja Novkovic is the co-director of the Co-operative Management Education Programme at St. Mary's University and the chair of the International Co-operative Alliance Research Committee.
2. Tom Webb is an adjunct professor at Saint Mary's University School of Business and a co-operative practitioner with over 25 years of experience.

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