

Post-Capitalist Economics and Environmentalism

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Chris Spannos (ed.), *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21st Century*, AK Press, 2008.

Chris Spannos' edited volume, *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21st Century*, provides a much needed expansion for participatory economics (or "parecon") and a compelling case for its relevance to questions of vision and strategy in radical and left politics today. As a full-time staff member with Z Communications, a website dedicated to social change, and as a member of the Vancouver Parecon Collective, Chris's first book project stands as a testament to the growing interest of many scholars and activists in parecon as well as Chris's own experience and motivation to bring them together. More than just an anthology of writings on parecon, this book makes a significant contribution to the questions of vision and strategy in the expanded spheres of ecology, kinship relations, politics, and culture. For those who are unfamiliar with parecon, this book serves as an excellent introduction to its basic values and concrete institutions. For those already versed in parecon, *Real Utopia* serves to expand parecon's basic commitments (equality, diversity, solidarity, self-management, balanced job complexes, and federated councils) to the other spheres of social life.

The book opens with a basic introduction to parecon. In part one, "defining the spheres of a participatory society," Spannos interviews Michael Albert on how parecon handles production, consumption, and allocation and how these institutions and values constitute an alternative to capitalist production. In the rest of the section, different authors address the implications of the core values and institutions of parecon in relation to various different social spheres: ecology, kinship, politics, and culture. How would parecon's vision of workers and consumer councils deal with environmental issues like pollution, waste, and other "externalities"? How can its principles be brought to bear on issues of kinship, gender, and familial organization? The book then moves on to consider parecon's values and institutions and how they might function in the creation of art through artist collectives and self-managed centers, in civil engineering through neighborhood councils and land trusts, in the creation of technologies through citizen committees affected by the new technology, and in education through student participation. It then looks at the various international examples of parecon experiments in Africa, India, the Balkans, Sweden, the U.K., Argentina, and Venezuela and assesses their operation and difficulties.

Part four examines parecon's theoretical and practical roots in the historical sequences of the Russian Soviets, Spanish anarchists, and the tradition of social democracy and libertarian socialism. *Real Utopia* then discusses issues of movement building in several specific North American parecon organizations (South End Press, *Z Magazine*, Mondragón bookstore, *Newstandard* magazine, and the Vancouver, Austin, and Chicago parecon collectives) from the perspective of those involved in the projects. What were their difficulties in getting started and then practicing self-management, and what were their degrees of success in networking as a movement?

Finally, how to get from here to there, “moving toward a participatory society,” outlines several possible ways to strategically realize some of the principles and institutions of parecon. How might we defend its institutions? What role might social movements play in supporting parecon institutions? All of these sections offer very specific examples and details, not only for how a post-capitalist society might run, but how it is, in fact, starting to emerge already.

As its title suggests the “nowhere” of U-topia is also a *real* “now here” of the present network of self-managing, participatory institutions prefiguring a post-capitalist world. While most of contemporary radical political theory and practice have been focused on the task of proving that “another world is *possible*,” *Real Utopia* marks an important shift in emphasis toward an examination of *actual* alternative institutions in order to develop “a convincing vision and strategy that reaches into the roots of today’s problems and seeks to replace them with emancipatory alternatives.” [p. 3.]

No longer simply satisfied with the necessary but insufficient critiques of capitalism, Marxism, and ecological devastation, two contributors to this anthology, Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, have been working for more than ten years on some very practicable economic alternatives to capitalist production drawn from the history of radical politics. If we don’t want capitalism or state socialism, what are we proposing instead? Over the years their work has caught the attention of many scholars and activists tired of the endless labor of leftist criticism and ready to join in the process (already underway) of creating functioning alternatives not only to the economic disparities of capitalism but to the social inequalities it produces in all spheres of life. In particular, Albert and Hahnel have incorporated an environmentalism previously undeveloped in their work. “It took over ten years, but I think we now have some concrete answers for environmentalists about precisely how the environment can be protected in a participatory economy.” [p. 57.] Opposed to both the capitalist valuation of environmental externalities (proposed by Jonathon Porritt and others) and a state centralized determination of environmental externalities, Hahnel proposes a participatory planning process based on producer and consumer councils that would collectively determine levels of pollution and resource depletion.

The underlying effort of *Real Utopia* is to shift radical theory and practice toward the neglected questions of vision and strategy. Though the book doesn’t propose a specific blueprint or program, it does offer several principles and concrete institutional examples of how economy, politics, kinship, culture, art, city planning, etc., might—and do—function in an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist way. If you ever find yourself stumped when asked what alternatives you might propose to some of the political institutions you are criticizing, you may find this book helpful. It is the best collection of essays on contemporary post-capitalist “revolutionary alternatives” that I am aware of.