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Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21st Century

Edited by Chris Spannos

Review by James Generic

Edited by Pigpen

"Real Utopia: Participatory Economics for the 21st Century", edited by Chris Spannos, is a collection of essays by a multitude of authors who have developed Participatory Economic (Parecon) theory, used it in real collective work, and have written extensively in defense of participatory economics. It is divided into 3 sections. The section on theory explores how Parecon could be used in a future post-capitalist world, how Parecon can be used in places outside the US like Africa, the Balkans, or Argentina, and applying Parecon theory to historical examples like the Russian and Spanish Revolutions, and Social Democracy in the 20th century. Parecon in practice examines current examples like South End Press, Mondragon Bookstore and Cafe in Winnipeg, the New standard magazine, the Vancouver Parecon Collective, and the Austin Project for Participatory Society. The final section examines how to incorporate Parecon into larger social movements and fights for social justice and a new world.

Parecon is an economic school of thought coming from libertarian socialist and anarchist political traditions which opposes traditional liberal economics and centrally planned economies. It seems to argue three basic things.

The first is that in society, there is a capitalist class, a working class, and a coordinator class, updating Marxist work of dividing the entirety of society into bourgeois and proletarian classes, with all else being outside the historical class struggle. Parecon argues that, in modern capitalism, this really leaves out a class consisting of people like professors, professionals, managers, supervisors, police, small business owners and other people who do not own large means of production, but do in fact have powers over the working class as the experts of society. This is known as "the coordinator class."

The second part of "Real Utopia" explores future economies, and argues that society should be run by a mixture of workers' councils running workplaces, and consumers' councils determining how to distribute goods and materials. Neighborhood organizations would also run neighborhoods, with any delegation being recallable. In addition, boards would plan out further economics.

"Rote" work (or "shitwork") and "empowering" work (enjoyable work) is regularly rotated. Participatory economics originated between work of Robin Hahnel and Michael Albert, and much of it came from direct experience working in collectives. They try to emphasize deconstructing gender roles, ecology, democratic processes, fair distribution, balancing talent, time, education, and empowering work.

Before I read this book, I didn't really understand Participatory Economics beyond the really bare essentials, and couldn't really read Michael Albert's dry texts. The basics that I was familiar with seemed a little wonkish, even utopian. The only thing that I took away from Participatory Economics was the "coordinator class" theory, which really helped explain the co-optation of social movements over time. Reading this helps it make more sense, especially in how people can apply it in everyday life.

I especially liked the section on Parecon in practice, as someone who's worked in collectives for years and didn't realize that we were using forms of Parecon already. It certainly helps to emphasize shifting

tasks around between the non-glorious rote work that is the meat and potatoes of any successful project, and the acknowledged tasks like dealing with press or being a recognized voice in the organization. Parecon also specifically leaves out how to arrive at such economics in society, since it does not call for a state takeover or even gradual reforms, but a vague confrontation with social institutions, probably a better strategy since anyone who says they have 100% of a blueprint is full of shit. Some of the criticisms I've heard from anarcho-syndicalists, is that a Parecon world would be overly bureaucratized and too technical. There might be some validity to that argument when Parecon is presented in its purest theoretical form, but as a basic philosophy, I'm starting to think that it has merits to learn from.

Of course, the question remains how to get to such a society? The aphorism "building a new world in the shell of the old" seems to be what Parecon advocates, but what about repression? Perhaps that is not really in the realm of Parecon, that it simply wishes to deal with the economics and political questions, not how to deal with confrontations with the old order. So much of the literature of the Left criticises existing systems and has less to say on what to do afterwards beyond vagaries. Chris Spannos did a wonderful job assembling essays dealing with how organizing another world would work from the bottom up, with the thought in mind that smashing capitalism or the state does not solve the world's problems in a day. One needs to take a good look at what sort of society you'd want to live in and take steps to try to achieve that society, here and in the future.