
BOOK NOTES

Michael Schneider, Mike Pottinger and John King The Distribution of Wealth – Growing Inequality?

Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2016, pp. 214, hardback edition, \$129.75.

Michael Schneider published the first edition of his book on inequality in wealth distribution in 2003. It was a worthy stocktaking of knowledge and data about the dimensions of wealth inequality in various countries, although it had only modest impact at the time. Much has happened since then, including the global financial crisis. Some political economists interpreted the GFC as having been caused by extreme wealth inequality: others have emphasised how it and the subsequent 'recovery' have further increased inequality. Thomas Piketty's blockbuster book then put wealth inequality right at the centre of public debate, riding the wave created by the Occupy movement's focus on the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of the top 1%. Michael Schneider was ahead of the pack. Not that this modest gentleman would ever make such a claim: he has been one of the quiet but consistently constructive contributors to Australian political economy.

This new edition of his wealth inequality book is timely, and it's coming to fruition owes much to the enthusiasm and help of his new co-authors, Mike Pottinger and John King. Its cool, careful presentation of data on patterns of wealth inequality within major OECD nations remains the central feature, but it is now updated with the most recent statistics. Also distinctive are the careful considerations of why the distribution of wealth (as distinct from income) matters, how to measure it, and how to assess its causes and consequences. An extensive discussion of Piketty's work and of trends in the patterns of wealth inequality - typically becoming even more unequal - are further valuable features. The latter concern is reflected in the new sub-title of the book (suggested by Michael's wife Margaret). The discussion of policy responses that might operate to narrow the inequalities also seems fresh and pertinent.

This will be Michael's final work: it is a marvellous achievement and deserving of wide readership and universal claim. Thank you so much, Michael.

Erik Paul

Australian Political Economy of Violence and Non-Violence

Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, pp. 114, hardback edition, \$65.70.

Palgrave's 'Pivot' series provides the opportunity for authors to address key issues in short books. Erik Paul is an ideal contributor on the topic of violence and non-violence, having been a long-standing contributor to peace studies: he was the last president of the University of Sydney's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, guiding its transformation last year into the newly independent Council for Peace with Justice. Early in the book he quotes the distinguished Norwegian peace activist Johann Galtung's view that: 'violence should be understood as avoidable insult to basic human needs and more generally to life, lowering the real level of need satisfaction below what is potentially possible'. Looking through this lens, Paul shows the diverse forms that structural violence takes, whether inflicted by states or corporations.

The book comprises eleven essays on themes at the interface of political economy and peace studies. It begins with an interpretation of violence as a tendency built into 'a hegemonic order characterised by the concentration of private power and wealth, the commodification of people and nature, the construction and manipulation of antagonisms and enemies, and the politics of fear as a US client state'. Australian politics is represented as authoritarian, dominated by a privileged elite. A chapter on corporatism develops this theme by looking at the abuses of corporate power that lead to greater social inequality and widespread corruption. A third chapter explores how commodification paves the way for further structural violence, turning people and nature into marketable processes, increasing exploitation and systemic victimisation of vulnerable groups. Then come some shorter essays. One explores how 'enemies' are constructed, *e.g.* by uniting us in nationalism while Islamophobia and other fears of 'the other' divide us. The topics also include: alienation, non-violence, heterodoxy, justice, human rights, convergence and struggles for democracy.

Overall, this strong analysis of contemporary social problems makes a powerful case for pursuing a non-violent and more peaceful political economic alternative.

Jeb Sprague (ed.)

Globalization and Transnational Capitalism in Asia and Oceania

Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2016, pp. 322, hardback edition, \$172.95.

This book arose from a conference organised by Georgina Murray and her colleagues at Griffith University. It was a gathering of the Network for Critical Studies of Global Capitalism (ACSGC) which was formed after an inaugural conference in Prague in 2011. For the Australian conference, local participants were joined by contributors from countries in North America, Asia and Oceania, coming together to share the fruits of their research on how globalising capitalism is affecting economies and societies in the broad Asia-Pacific region. Not surprisingly, these concerns are many and diverse. Different chapters in the book deal with issues ranging from tax havens in small Pacific states to mining in PNG, schooling in India, uneven development in Laos, the transformation of China's working class, and the state, capital and class struggle in Australia.

What gives the collection of conference papers some degree of coherence is the common concern to explore how these specific concerns relate to broader patterns of globalising capitalism. The introduction to the book by the US editor Jeb Sprague and the chapters by leading transnational class scholars Jerry Harris and William Robinson are particularly helpful in this regard. There is also a concluding chapter that seeks to draw the threads together by asking what are the prospects for using political economic analysis to make a practical difference.

The organisers of NCSGC are currently planning the next conference, aiming to hold it in Habana, Cuba on November 1-3 this year. This will switch the focus from the Asia-Pacific region to the Americas – Central, North, South and the Caribbean. The NCSGC refers to the need to analyse 'the rise of an ultra-neoliberal authoritarianism political project in the United States, in conjunction with the resurgence of right-wing political sectors across the Americas'. It is also in the Americas that some of the strongest challenges to capitalist hegemony have been mounted. So this should be another interesting gathering and perhaps, in due course, a new book supplementing the one under review here.

Graham Dunkley

One World Mania: A Critical Guide to Free Trade, Financialisation and Over-globalisation

Zed Books, London, 2016, pp. 288, paperback edition, \$34.40.

Capitalist globalisation needs a supporting ideology, emphasising the benefits of 'free trade' and the unimpeded reach of global capital. Challenging that ideology by scrutinising the actual effects of globalisation is fundamentally important. Graham Dunkley's contribution is the latest in a long line of books seeking to do so, and it is one of the very best. It systematically structures the issues, carefully reviews the arguments and evidence, and provides a powerful perspective on the gulf between the orthodox theory and observable reality. As Steve Keen says on the cover, it is 'a scholarly debunking of the vast the overrated benefits of free trade and globalisation'. Robert Wade and Ha-Joon Chang's cover comments are similarly laudatory, and deservedly so.

Dunkley's book contends that 'one world mania' accentuates economic inequalities and recurrently produces disappointing outcomes, even by conventional business criteria such as productivity and faster economic growth rates. His book dissects key components in the pro-globalisation ideologies and interests, starting with the myth of a universally beneficial free trade and moving on to a critique of the Washington consensus, capital and supply chains, and financial globalisation ('the dark lords of money'). Two comprehensive chapters towards the end of the book look at the array of damages and costs that impact on humankind and nature.

Overall, this is a powerful critique of capitalist globalisation, its ideology of free trade and 'globalisation pacts', such as regional trade agreements that usher in anti-democratic investor state dispute settlement processes. So what is to be done? Is an alternative world order possible? The book ends with some suggestions for making the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organisation more accountable. Reform, not abolition, is the author's prescription for these institutions. Supporting this policy stance, he says: 'this model offers a clear contrast with the present process led by global integration and dominated by business agendas, so the new order would need to be sought to a gradual construction of an alternative, more people oriented international consensus'.

Verity Burgmann

Globalisation and Labour in the 21st Century

Routledge, London and New York, 2016, pp. 262, hardback edition, \$155.65.

Verity Burgmann's new book presents a labour perspective on the globalisation of corporate capital. It shows the multiple forms of action that workers can take in resisting, fighting back and formulating strategies for a better society - one that would not be dominated by the rule of capital. This challenges more conservative views that treat corporate capitalist globalisation as an unstoppable steamroller or implicitly adopt a state-centric reformism. Burgmann's quite different strategic class approach is reflected in her choice of chapter titles, each using active verbs: Confronting... Reversing... Subverting... Countering... Confounding... Opposing... Protecting... Raging. She shows that, for each dimension of the challenge facing workers, there is an active response. This leads directly into discussion of what can be done, what works, what obstacles must be overcome and what more is needed.

Indeed, much can evidently be done by labour activists. Defending and extending the coverage of unions is critical, and one of the chapters carefully considers the possibilities for reversing the decline that has occurred in recent decades, including the better use of modern information technologies (workers of the world, unite online!). Other chapters look at struggles within industries where jobs offer only sub-standard sweatshop conditions, or where the jobs are threatened by lean production, capital flight and 'offshoring'. Much can also be done to confound workforce fragmentation, resisting the racism that often accompanies the greater use of immigrant labour, and opposing unemployment and precarity.

Beyond the workplace, struggles against privatisation and cuts to public services also necessarily locate workers, as citizens, in a broader arena of the state and public policy. Developing linkages between solidaristic struggles, anti-austerity politics and international social movements are further ingredients in the broader strategy for labour. In all these areas and more Burgmann carefully describes what workers and their organisations have done, are doing, and need to strategise for the future.

No, it ain't all over. Far from it, although 'striking back against the Empire', the title of the concluding chapter, may sound like a tough call.

Labour, according to Burgmann's analysis, remains the major oppositional force to global capital. As she says, 'the resistance to globalisation is far from futile because there is one problem that will always remain with capital: its ultimate dependence upon, and therefore the inherent power of, labour'. The recognition that capitalism is ecologically unsustainable also, on her reading, indicates that working class and environmental imperatives are compatible and complimentary: hence the concluding comment on the need for 'a red-green sustainability project'. This is important reading for all labour analysts and activists, especially those who may be currently feeling dispirited by the enormity of the challenges.

Claudio Tuniz and Patrizia Tiberi Vipraio

Humans: An Authorised Biography

Springer, AG Switzerland, translated from Italian for the English edition, 2015, pp. 124, paperback edition, \$51.85.

This great little book deserves to be read by all people concerned to understand where we, as a species, came from and how the challenges we now face reflect that long historical evolution. Serious engagement with understanding our 'deep history' takes us into the realms of anthropology, archaeology, natural history, geology and geography. But political economy is right there 'in the mix' too because the focus is on the influences that have shaped the material conditions of our existence. One of the authors is an economist, the other a distinguished scientist; and their joint work, written originally in Italian, is now available in an English edition. In a mere 124 pages, it traverses the state of knowledge about the origins of humans, going back over millennia. The authors raise fundamental questions about whether humans should be regarded as diverse species. They consider the significance in this evolution of different types of food, clothing, making tools, types of burial procedure and the role of warfare.

Reading the book shows the inherently exploratory nature of scientific inquiry and its essentially open-ended character (mainstream economists please note). It is like being invited on two great journeys – one following the evolution of species and another exploring how scientists have analysed that evolution.

An important issue is what to do with this knowledge in a difficult and dangerous world, facing the major economic, environmental, social and political dilemmas that confront us today. It is to the authors' credit that they raise these issues, focusing on our need to create a more balanced relationship with each other, other species, and the physical environment. The authors don't claim to have all the answers – who does? – but they pose the big questions and give us the knowledge with which we can better understand the historical context, challenges and possibilities.

Should we be optimistic about prospects for further human progress? The authors emphasise that it is the capacity for symbolic thought that most clearly distinguishes modern humans. This capacity has evolved as the basis for our humanity, providing scope for behaviours that have enormous potential – whether for public benefit or for social and environmental harm. It is the capacity to plan, to change direction and to redirect our energies for different social purposes. These are, indeed, the prerequisites for acquiring knowledge and using it in fruitful ways. The book is clearly written in that progressive political economic spirit, while canvassing a broad interdisciplinary approach to understanding human evolution.

Book notes by Frank Stilwell

