

and other concerned citizens wanting a readily accessible analysis of the main features of contemporary economy and society.

So, in effect, here are two mutually beneficial approaches to modern political economy. There are striking differences in both style and method between the two books. In terms of *style*, VHT is both forensic and erudite, albeit sometimes seemingly ‘inebriated by the exuberance of its own verbosity’; while S-BPC tidily and succinctly summarizes a wide array of social science research and debates, sometimes at the expense of leaving the reader (this one anyway) thirsting for more explicit personal judgments about the most fruitful way forward. In terms of *method*, the former is primarily concerned with examining and contesting economic orthodoxy, while the latter seeks to build a positive alternative to that orthodoxy right from the start. Putting them together gives us a great basis for future progress, albeit not necessarily taking us on a single track.

And then there is a third type of contribution to political economy – developing analysis for the explicit purpose of social and political advocacy. There has been a long and important tradition of this type of writing, making the case for particular political economic changes – whether reformist or revolutionary – that could herald the creation of more equitable, satisfying and sustainable societies. Such writing takes us beyond the critique of modern capitalism or ‘market society’ to consideration of fundamentally different socioeconomic orders. There are glimmers of this in both the VHT and S-BPC books, but a more striking example is to be found in the next book under review below....

LIFE WITHOUT MONEY

Anitra Nelson and Franz Zimmerman, Eds.

Pluto Press, 2011, 244 pp.

Reviewed by Ted Trainer

The GFC, the European ‘de-growth’ movement, Occupy Wall St, and the Transition Towns movement, all seem to be part of a long overdue surge in discontent with the unacceptability of the system and the quest for alternatives. Thus this is a timely book, reconsidering some classic themes in a contemporary context focused on alternatives to money.

Eleven chapters explore a range of interesting and important themes, loosely divided into critiques of capitalism and consumerism, and activism and experiments. Among the topics are non-market socialism, self management, the labour credit system of the Twin Oaks commune, the money-free economy of Spanish squatters, the elimination of work and wages, and the gift economy. There are helpful introductory and concluding chapters by the editors. Although all chapters are clear and easily understood by the non-specialist reader, the discussions are also likely to be valuable refreshers for professional students of political economy.

The book's central thesis is that a satisfactory society requires the scrapping of markets, the state and money. The emphasis on the third of these propositions is particularly distinctive and debatable. It is obvious that many of the most absurd and outrageous aspects of consumer-capitalist society are directly due to the monetary system, especially its taken for granted assumption that money must take the form of credit which has to be repaid with interest, and which has to be issued by private banks. But the key question is, are the resulting effects due to the use of money or just due to the form of money used in consumer-capitalist society? Could a different form retain the advantages of money while avoiding these effects? My main doubts regarding the book are to do with whether the case given for the need to scrap all forms of money is convincing.

I firmly believe that we are entering an era of intense and irremediable scarcity brought on by resource and ecological problems, in which the rich countries in particular will be jolted into a scramble for radically different social systems. These will not be characterised by heavy industrialisation, globalisation, economic growth or affluent lifestyles, and they will have to at least heavily control markets if not entirely eliminate them. The new local economies will not function satisfactorily unless they are mostly under participatory social control at the level of the neighbourhood committee and town meeting, with a relatively minor role for the remnant 'state'. This vision sets crucial questions regarding the role, if any, of money. How will we balance contributions and rewards, make production and distribution decisions, provide incentives, raise and allocate capital, ensure efficiency, and coordinate the economy? Can and should these things be done without the use of money?

As I see it, most of these questions are not so difficult to answer in traditional 'socialist' terms, e.g. via rational democratic public planning of the essentials through open and accountable processes. (After all, as the book points out, the present economy is heavily and meticulously planned...mostly within the corporate sector.) This could in principle be carried out without the use of money, especially since the advent of IT, simply by feeding in statistics from shops, farms, factories, etc. and working out whether we need to produce as many tomatoes or jumpers next year as last year.

But it is mostly at the level of calculating personal inputs and consumption that it seems to me it would still be desirable to retain a monetary form of accounting, most likely of the 'time dollar' variety. Although in my view the basic principle should be contribute as we are able to and receive as we need to, I would like to be able to judge how many extra hours 'work' I should contribute to 'earn' the goods my lifestyle required in excess of my 'needs'. I might want more elaborate equipment for my pottery hobby and I would want to know what is a fair additional input to 'pay' for this. A form of money that was no more than a unit of accounting, and could not be lent at interest, or used for speculative purposes, or sustain a financial sector making 40% of corporate profits, would enable us all to know if we were pulling our weight and how much more or less we should contribute if we wished to acquire something in excess of what would satisfy our needs. This doesn't necessarily imply having to resort to a market to determine the appropriate inputs and costs.

These comments indicate the valuable discussion issues that this book sets up. If the planet's ecological and social systems continue their accelerating collapse we are soon going to have to confront the task of building new and very different systems, and central among the decisions to be made will be those to do with the nature and role of money. The book does a good job of stimulating thought about these issues.