



Summer 2005

AMERICA BEYOND CAPITALISM: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy

by Gar Alperovitz

Wiley, 2004, 336 pages, \$24. 95

reviewed by Adria Scharf

Readers of YES! already know that thousands of grassroots economic alternatives are flourishing in communities across the country. Many readers may themselves be involved in worker cooperatives, conservation land trusts, soup kitchen collectives, and other efforts to strengthen the fabric of their local economies.

But might existing experiments in democratic economic alternatives, taken together, form something of larger significance? Might they form the basis for systemic change? With the liberal political agenda in disarray at the national level, it's past time for progressive activists to start thinking big and long-term and connecting our work to a shared vision for a democratic political-economic system.

America Beyond Capitalism will ignite that creative imagination. In it, historian and political economist Gar Alperovitz joins a scathing assessment of the state of U. S. democracy to an inspiring vision for long-term change. It's essential post-election reading for anyone concerned with social change in the U. S.

Our society is in trouble, Alperovitz begins. The signs are everywhere—escalating inequality, erosion of liberties, growing cynicism about the democratic system. We are, he suggests, at the initial stages of a full-blown legitimacy crisis as more and more citizens realize that the current system simply cannot deliver on its promises. Simultaneously, the federal budget crisis and the cooptation of the Democratic Party and regulatory agencies by corporations make the traditional “liberal” solutions— bigger social programs, more regulation—untenable.

This grim judgment leads to the question at the heart of the book: If the current system is broken and traditional fixes are no longer feasible, what set of institutions would actually restore and sustain equality, liberty, and democracy in the coming century? With bold strokes, Alperovitz sketches the outlines of just such a system.

What Alperovitz terms a Pluralist Commonwealth (pluralist to emphasize the diversity of democratic institutional forms, commonwealth to suggest the centrality of public wealth holding) entails first and foremost replacing corporate control of capital with new institutions of property ownership. Over time, municipal ownership structures, worker-owned and community-owned businesses, and a national public trust would come to hold public wealth on behalf of communities and the nation. Once the economy shifts from corporate control to public control, other changes could follow. For example, the workweek could be reduced to permit greater free time, enabling more participation in the community and in politics. Regional reorganization and greater decentralization—political and economic—would also be critical to permit robust democratic practice at the local level, Alperovitz argues.

Getting from here to there should not require violent revolution, Alperovitz says, but rather an evolutionary process of deep institutional transformation, building on the bulwark of democratic economic alternatives—from land trusts to worker ownership, community development corporations, and worker pension investment trusts—already on the ground.

It's clear that over time, system transformation would require mass movements; profound political realignments at national, state, and local levels; and ultimately a serious power struggle. But Alperovitz seems to suggest that a key first step is to build experiences of economic democracy into workplaces and communities—here and now.

You don't have to be a radical—or to accept every element of the Pluralist Commonwealth vision—to find great value in this book. It's packed with information on trends in equality and corporate incursions on democracy. What's more, it pulls together a wealth of research findings on a broad range of community-based economic experiments, not only documenting this great mosaic of alternatives, but deftly analyzing their most promising facets and synthesizing them, perhaps for the first time, into a political analysis.

The book moves from a dark portrait of the current moment to a place of profound possibility. Alperovitz approaches the future with a historian's long view. Deep social change may look impossible just now—but so did overthrowing Jim Crow in the South of the 1930s and 1940s. History teaches us, Alperovitz reminds, that all major historical changes look difficult or impossible before they happen—but in world history, radical systemic change “is as common as grass.”

Adria Scharf is co-editor of Dollars & Sense, the magazine of economic justice, www.dollarsandsense.org. For more information on Alperovitz' work, see www.americabeyondcapitalism.com.