

Book Review

Economic Democracy: The Working Class Alternative to Capitalism,

by Allan Engler, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2010. \$15.95 CAD paper.
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In this world of highly specialized academic discourse, the art of writing a manifesto has all but disappeared. A good manifesto should be short, concise and all-encompassing. Through sharp language it should cut to the core. In this sense, Allan Engler's short book, *Economic Democracy*, should be seen as a contribution to the revival of the manifesto in confronting neoliberalism in Canada and around the world.

As a long-time activist in the labour movement, heading up Local 400 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and contributing to a strong left current in the Vancouver and District Labour Council (VDLC), Engler approaches the problems of modern capitalism as an organic intellectual. Building on his earlier work, in which he examines the myth of market individualism, he diagnoses in clear language the many deep-seated problems inherent under capitalism and attempts to prescribe a solution, based on grassroots economic democracy.

Inspired by Marx, Engler situates modern capitalism in the disjuncture between the narrow restriction of property rights and the growing socialization of labour. On the one hand, ownership under capitalism is concentrated into the hands of an "entitled minority". While this is often obfuscated through the apparent freedom of individuals to buy and sell things on the market, Engler argues that market freedom is just another word for "letting the capitalists decide" (18). Engler traces the implications of minority entitlement over the past three hundred years, which has entailed the destabilization of the world market, the destruction of the environment, the rise of colonial wars and the exploitation of peripheral regions by the core countries.

On the other hand, people are increasingly interdependent, tied together in a complex division of labour. Less and less capable of existing

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outside of market relations, they become dependent on social cooperation in order to survive. With the growing socialization of labour, the myth of competitive individualism becomes open to contestation as, increasingly, working people come to recognize that productivity cannot be simply attributed to the entrepreneurial spirit of individual capitalists, but is the outcome of complex relationships advanced between workers, communities, and nature.

While Engler goes some distance in diagnosing the problems of modern capitalism, he does not quite meet his mark. The key to writing a good manifesto is not only exposing the dark and dismal reality, but also evoking the collective protagonist that promises a way out, cobbling together a shared sensibility that transcends the relationship between author and reader. A good manifesto stands between voluntarism and determinism, such that the transformation envisioned is neither the result of the inevitable march of progress, nor is it simply a matter of waking people up out of false consciousness.

On the one hand, the book falls short to the extent that it falls back on deterministic arguments. Just like the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Engler argues, the movement to a post-capitalist world will be a gradual one. It will not be produced through a revolutionary dictatorship or armed uprising. No single event will bring it about. In fact, the change will be incremental through the advancement of workplace organization, community mobilization and democratic political action. Through slowly extending the power of social ownership, the powers of the “entitled minority” will be necessarily weakened. Eventually, a “tipping point” will be reached and the system will be transformed as a whole.

But how will the power of “social ownership” be advanced? At times this reads as an inevitable process. From the emergence of the early industrial unions through to the development of social security and the advancement of the rights of women and people of colour, Engler’s account of twentieth century history appears as a ceaseless movement forward fuelled by the growing socialization of labour. However, barring a few comments on the deregulation of capital flows, he fails to sufficiently explain the significant shift in ruling relations over the last forty years. The rise of neoliberalism is simply attributed to the failure of trade union leaders and single-issue social activists to challenge the system as a whole. It is attributed to the lack of faith by the working class that a viable alternative to capitalism exists.

Missing from Engler’s analysis is an in-depth discussion of “socialized labour,” which he defines as “people who depend on income from

their labour” (45). The rise of socialized labour is in part attributed to a process of primitive accumulation, by which people are dispossessed of their land and are compelled to sell their labour for a wage. It is fuelled by a process of technological innovation, through which people are integrated into an increasingly complex social machine. However, the notion of socialized labour is limited. To the extent that it includes *everyone*, this category lacks analytical power. It does not provide an adequate means of understanding the divisions in progressive social movements or the problem of building solidarity in the broader community.

On the other hand, Engler poses the solution as a matter of proper consciousness. It is simply a matter of showing people that a world of human equality, democracy and cooperation is practical and attainable. “Once the scaffoldings of capitalist property relations have been removed, people will understand that well-being everywhere depends on human equality” (62). Unfortunately, Engler does not convincingly show how such a world is possible. Instead, he falls back on the evocation of the hypothetical situation, that moment when revolution has been achieved, minority entitlement has been abolished and the community finally sits down to make its own decisions.

The problem is that Engler does not explain who or what this “community” is. This can, in part, be attributed to his latent populism. He tends to target forces *external* to the community that are responsible for its downfall. The “working class alternative” is purely negative, in the sense that it is simply contingent on denying minority entitlement. However, there is no sense of how this is a positive program. Aside from a few hints of union organizing and social activism, there is no discussion of existing movements that are taking concrete steps towards a better world. In the absence of such a discussion, the advancement of alternatives is inevitably abstract and schematic. At times, Engler appears as a makeshift fortune-teller, promising an end to war, environmental degradation and social inequality, viewing this more as a natural outcome than as a process that must be actively pursued through the adoption of specific strategies and tactics over the course of struggle.

“Socialized labour” and “community” are the two black-boxes that Engler leaves unexplained. However, the book does take us in the direction of rethinking these terms and their relationship in practice. Certainly, the rise of neoliberalism over the past forty years reflects the advancement of a fractured landscape upon which citizenship and wage labour have been unevenly inscribed. In this context, how can we effectively struggle to reconstitute the relationship between “work”

and “citizenship” in a manner that undermines the market individualism that has been so prevalent over the past forty years? For instance, how does this play out on the ground through the struggles of public sector workers to retain their collective bargaining freedoms? Or in the struggles of illegal immigrants to obtain the right to residence, gaining access to public schools and hospitals? In appraising the prefigurative possibilities of such struggles, it is not enough to simply invoke the universal protagonist that promises a way out. Rather, it is important to recognize how these struggles come to develop concrete relationships with a broader community in practice.