

## Book Review

# From Corporate Globalisation to Global Co-operation. We Owe it to Our Children

By J Tom Webb

Fernwood Publishing, Halifax and Winnipeg, Canada. 2016.

Tom Webb is searching for a better world. *From Corporate Globalisation to Global Co-operation* provides a devastating critique of the world as it is. In a tour de force assessment of the impact of the neoliberal economic consensus on the environment, nature, inequality, and more, Webb powerfully sets out the need for action.

In a world of asymmetrical information, Webb accurately challenges the present day application of neoclassical economics, starting with the current distortion and corruption of Adam Smith's work by reframing concepts such as the "invisible hand" more in-keeping with the intended purpose and context; followed by calling out the fiction that is "trickle up economics"; and highlighting the inherently flawed capitalist desire for exponential growth in a world of finite resources.

This leads Webb to the conclusion that sooner or later capitalism will collapse, "weighed down by its destruction of nature and human society, without which no economy can exist".

With this, one could be thoroughly despondent and wanting of hope but for Webb laying the foundations on which a blueprint for an alternative economy — a co-operative economy — can be built. And then builds on them.

Webb writes of the need to transition from "power over" to "power to" organisations and looks at co-operatives as a source of hope. Looking at the co-operative movement through rose-tinted glasses is an easy trap for good co-operators to fall into. But it is a trap Webb avoids. Firstly by drawing on a range of examples from across the world, and secondly by critiquing and challenging some of the current practices within the movement. Although I do feel some movement criticisms are insufficiently substantiated or evidenced by Webb, and could be disputed. Without having advanced evidence to support some of the assertions made about individual societies the criticisms risk not having whatever impact was intended.

A call is made by Webb for the movement to raise its game:

co-operative performance needs to improve significantly if co-operatives are to rise to the challenge posed by the collapse of capitalism.

But goes on to warn that

where co-operatives simply copy the competition they become just like the competition. When the resemblance is complete they have destroyed their co-operative.

The list of challenges for co-operatives are well worth a read for those seeking to improve their co-operative.

Webb strongly believes that not enough is being done to tackle the business-driven environmental destruction evidenced at the start of the book. To tackle this he calls for the addition of an 8th principle into the International Co-operative Alliance statement of identity:

Co-operatives recognise that the human species is but one part of an interconnected and inter-dependent universe and that respecting nature and life in all its expressions is not separable from respect for the dignity and value of each person.

Anticipating and dismissing the argument that we should not change the Statement because it has international recognition, Webb describes the inability to change the Statement as a step backwards.

Webb's fondness for worker co-operatives, and in particular the Mondragon model repeats throughout the book, but comes through most strongly when he suggests not only the addition of an 8th principle, but the subsequent merger of the Mondragon Principles with the ICA Principles. Many may see this as provocative. Others may welcome a shift away from a perceived slant toward consumer societies within the current ICA statement. This leads Webb to call for the movement to create a stronger conceptual framework for global co-operation.

Webb sees co-operatives as part of the radical centre: "radical in the sense that it is rooted in the dual social and individual nature of humanity". For Webb co-operatives provide a solution. A solution that needs to be supported by public policy. Webb sets out the public policy benefits of co-operatives, focussing on the difference from investor driven business. Though while no doubt evidence could be adduced for many of these benefits, it is not presented here.

Having set out his views, Webb continues by setting out a list of support states should provide to co-operatives, while also arguing for the maintenance of co-operative autonomy. When calling for a 'level playing field' between investor driven and co-operative enterprise Webb is clear that "what co-operatives need is appropriate, not equal, regulation". The public policy asks include a constitutional right to establish co-operatives, supported by incorporating legislation recognising the ICA statement and the different forms of co-operative.

Indivisible reserves get special mention — with a call for special tax treatment as in Italy, coupled with a call for state regulation to prevent current members appropriating indivisible capital built up over generations. Here it seems Webb is nailing his colours to the mast of common ownership rather than co-ownership within co-operatives. Some may conclude that this clearly mirrors Principle 3, but would present some challenges in the UK.

Having set out the need for action, tackled the myths on the current economic consensus, promoted and critiqued the movement, and set out the public policy benefits of co-operatives with details of the necessary support, all in 164 pages, Webb ends his book in an aspirational and hopeful tone. Webb reminds us that "nothing is inevitable, but everything is possible". With co-operatives as a tool, and co-operation as a way of thinking and a state of mind, Webb believes we can build a better world.

## **The Reviewer**

Ian Adderley is currently a trustee and Chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, has worked in the co-operative movement, and served as an elected member in a number of co-operatives.