

Book Review: John Asimakopoulos, *Social Structures of Direct Democracy: On the Political Economy of Equity*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016 (Reprint edition). ISBN: 978-1-60846-492-0 (Paperback). 213 Pages. \$28.00.

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In his book, *Social Structures of Direct Democracy*, John Asimakopoulos proposes that the high levels of inequality which are prevalent in neoclassical capitalist economies should be replaced by a system of universal social and material equity. The author provides a blueprint of how compensation and workloads can be equalized. For example, Asimakopoulos writes that top corporations should have “half their boards of directors filled through statistically random selection from the demos, the other half from workers of the enterprise” (18). Throughout his book, the author also argues that if remuneration and compensation is equalized for everyone, this will, in turn, eliminate power differentials and allow individuals to relate to one another in a meaningful way.

While Asimakopoulos advocates for fundamentally restructuring society, he acknowledges that “an overnight abolition of government, existing institutions, and life processes would result in chaos without necessarily delivering the desired outcomes” (31-23). The author also observes that Americans are typically reluctant to engage in any type of

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meaningful organized protests which would be sufficient to disrupt the hierarchal social structure that has largely been coopted by corporations. Asimakopoulous is somewhat critical of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protest movements. He argues that the Occupy movement failed to result in any substantive change mainly because protesters did not make any demands. This, indeed, illustrates, that, at least as far as the United States is concerned, the general population is largely apathetic and simply not interested in organized collective action. Asimakopoulous contends that societal education is one of the tools that may ultimately help the masses become active in demanding reform and advocating for change.

As the title of the book suggests, Asimakopoulous is a staunch proponent of direct democracy, a process where “every citizen comprising the demos or community represents themselves as sovereigns in decision making” and does not vote for someone to vote for them (5). He argues that representative democracies, such as what is currently utilized in the United States, are easily corrupted by big business interests. Indeed, in discussing the evolution of the U.S. Constitution, Asimakopoulous contends that the Founding Fathers were suspicious of the “landless rabble” who might use direct democracy to vote away their prosperity (45). The author argues that these white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant “moneyed people” wanted to have the “illusion of participation” rather than an actual democracy (45-46). Interestingly, he suggests that this is still the case today. For example, Asimakopoulous points to a 2012 study which indicates that both Republican and Democrat senators alike tend to vote in the interests of their richest constituents while ignoring the poor (see Hayes 2012). He also asserts that the Supreme Court’s deeply divided 5-4 decision in the Citizen’s United Case (2010) enabled power elites to use their wealth to “manipulate political outcomes” and circumvent the democratic principle of *one person, one vote*” (51, italics added).

It is clear from reading this book that Asimakopoulous is highly critical of the practice where corporate executives are appointed to governmental regulatory agencies, such as the Federal Reserve, especially when they continue to have strong financial ties to big business. Indeed, this is consistent with Joseph Stiglitz (2012) who describes how wealthy individuals use lobbying to coopt regulatory agencies in order to appoint members from their own rank. Asimakopoulous also borrows Mark Zepezauer’s (2004) catchphrase “wealthfare” to explain how former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson persuaded Congress in a three-page memo to essentially write a blank check to benefit financial corporations in the epic 2008 Wall Street

bailout. What is especially troubling is that Asimakopoulous writes that the former Treasury Secretary took advantage of his position to benefit his former employer, Goldman Sachs, while at the same time punishing Goldman's rival, Lehman Brothers (which would later have the dubious distinction of filing the largest bankruptcy in US history). The author uses this, as well numerous other examples throughout the book to support his argument that "more money equals power, and more power equals greater chances of getting what you want" (53).

In order to alleviate some of the most egregious abuses of power described above, Asimakopoulous argues that a lottery scheme should be used not only to fill seats in Congress and the court system but also in Corporate America. He argues that this random selection of decision makers will lead to more fairness and egalitarianism. While Asimakopoulous does not explicitly mention this in his book, it is logical that sophisticated sampling techniques (e.g. a stratified random probability sample) would be utilized to ensure that all individuals are equally represented. As he points out in the book, "If we randomly select say 1,200 individuals [from a population of 300 million Americans]...we will mathematically end up with 1,200 individuals that are representative of the larger population and in the same proportions, namely X percent workers, Y percent employers, Z percent students, and so on for other constituencies" (65).

In specifically discussing the layperson's role in the state legislature, Asimakopoulous argues that randomly selected legislators can deliberate which issues should be decided upon by the demos. Interestingly, the author contends that the internet can be utilized to facilitate what he refers to as Electronic Direct Democracy. While this suggestion makes for interesting reading, one can make the argument that this could be problematic, especially if some actors were able to hack into the voting system and manipulate the process (see Holt, Burruss, and Bossler, 2015). Perhaps, even an unsuccessful hacking attempt might be sufficient to compromise the public confidence in an Electronic Direct Democracy. Still, in spite of the potential caveats of e-voting, Asimakopoulous is to be commended for attempting to devise a clever strategy for hundreds of millions of people to vote.

Asimakopoulous argues that the only restriction on whether a citizen may vote or be randomly selected to govern is that he or she must be over the age of sexual consent. While he does not delve into this area too deeply, this is an interesting proposition that would be worthy of more discussion in any classroom. For example, could a convicted triple murderer who has been released back into society be permitted to vote?

From closely reading this book, it would appear that Asimakopoulous would respond affirmatively to this question. As the author eloquently writes, “Once a system starts excluding people it is no longer egalitarian but on the path toward totalitarianism...” (67).

Anyone who is familiar with Asimakopoulous’s work knows that he is a strong advocate of education which helps citizens resist propaganda and identify social injustices. Professor Asimakopoulous is, in fact, so committed to education that he is currently working to start an accredited graduate school that is tuition free for economically disadvantaged students. Given this, it is not the least bit surprising that Asimakopoulous argues in his book that all individuals should be provided with free education of the highest quality based on Freire’s (2000) principles of critical pedagogy. The author also proposes that educational institutions should be nationalized at every level (from kindergarten to twelfth grade) with a standardized curriculum. Asimakopoulous contends that early childhood education should begin as early as age two, and only the most qualified and experienced Ph.D.’s should be entrusted with this important responsibility. Moreover, he argues there should be no private Ivy Leagues, including the usual suspects of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, as these institutions “create and reinforce an elite class consciousness” (149). To illustrate this point, Asimakopoulous asserts that one of Harvard’s past presidents used the term *riff-raff* to describe working class veterans who entered the very expensive university with G.I. Bill money shortly after World War II.²

Asimakopoulous contends that neoliberalism has transformed most colleges and universities, especially those attended predominately by the middle and working classes, into what he refers to as “publicly funded vocational schools” (151). The author alleges that only students at elite private institutions (such as Harvard) are truly afforded an educational experience which combines critical thinking and political participation. He argues that if this type of educational experience was provided to the masses, it would lead to a counter-ideology and ultimately resistance to the status quo. To illustrate the above point Asimakopoulous makes reference to how whites, prior to the Civil War, were forbidden in Southern states from teaching slaves to read and write, so as not to spark an insurrection or revolt. While this particular metaphor is thought

² My grandfather, Carmen C. Gisi, was on the front lines of the Battle of the Bulge during World War II; he helped liberate the Landsberg Concentration Camp; and he assisted in the capture of Berchtesgaden (see Barron and Cygan, 2013). Harvard University would have been quite lucky to have had “Papa Gisi,” or any other person who has honorably served this country, as a student.

provoking and likely to be the catalyst for many invigorating classroom conversations, some scholars may disagree with this comparison. Nevertheless, it is evident from reading this book that the author is passionate about using education as a vehicle for social change and for that he is to be praised.

One of the most interesting (yet controversial) aspects of *Social Structures of Direct Democracy* is that Asimakopoulous argues that all workers should be given a standard National Wage. He writes, “Just like a gallon of milk is the same regardless of who produced it, one hour’s worth of street cleaning is equal to one hour worked by a medical doctor. Why? Because all socially necessary labor is, well, labor” (99). The National Wage Asimakopoulous proposes would be tax-free and guaranteed, as long as a citizen fulfills his or her work responsibilities. The author also suggests that in this system where workers are the owners, corporate profits could be utilized to finance a variety of social programs, such as, healthcare, education, childcare, and housing, just to name a few. Also, under this model, Asimakopoulous proposes that a citizen could neither earn additional income nor be permitted to hoard a substantial portion of his or her income.

There is no question that Asimakopoulous’s notion of a National Wage is extremely original and creative. The problem, however, at least in my opinion, is that it would be next to impossible to get most Americans to agree to a National Wage. Even though, as Asimakopoulous points out, the richest 1% of Americans own 33.8 percent of the nation’s wealth, it is likely that the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches myth still appeals to lower and middle class workers today. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why blue-collar Rust belt residents were willing to vote for a billionaire during the 2016 presidential election. It is plausible this notion of rugged individualism (popularized under Republican President Herbert Hoover during the 1930s) even resonates, at least on some level, with social progressives. For example, Rutger Bregman (2016), one of Europe’s up-and-coming, most progressive young thinkers (and someone who would certainly enjoy reading Asimakopoulous’s book—if he hasn’t already), argues that, “Society can’t function without some degree of inequality. There still need to be incentives to work, to endeavor, and to excel, and money is a very effective stimulus (109).

After carefully reading this book, it is my belief that even if the vast majority of Americans were to benefit from Asimakopoulous’s proposal (and they just might), this plan simply could not be put into action – at least not anytime within the next 100 years or so. Without knowing for sure, I would venture to guess that even Asimakopoulous would agree

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with me on this. Nevertheless, as Rutger Bregman (2016) reminds us, utopias can come true; they always “start out small, with experiments that ever so slowly change the world” (71). I applaud Professor Asimakopoulous for thinking outside of the box and providing readers with his unique vision of how to eradicate poverty and restore political rights. This is an important book; it is well-written, well-researched, and it will surely generate important discussions in virtually any graduate classroom. For all of these reasons, I am delighted to recommend this book.

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