

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Andrew Cumbers, *Reclaiming Public Ownership: Making Space for Economic Democracy*, London: Zed Books, 2012. ISBN 978178032 0069 (paper)

The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 prompted a series of extraordinary measures to be undertaken by neoliberal governments across the ‘advanced’ economies. Perhaps the most unexpected, and in many ways spectacular, of these, particularly in terms of the investment involved, was the return of public ownership. As an illustration of this, consider the UK investment of public money in the banking sector alone: “...at the peak of the crisis, the government had committed the astronomical sum of £1.162 trillion of public money to provide loans, share purchases and guarantees to its errant banks” (p.1-2).

Rather than allow the free market philosophy (and its hand-in-glove commitment to rampant privatisation) the opportunity to take a firm grip on the political consciousness once more, Andrew Cumbers wishes to exploit these unprecedented events to provoke new discussion around the value and role of public ownership. It is important to note at the beginning of this review that Cumbers approaches ‘public ownership’ in its broadest sense as:

“...encapsulating all those attempts, both outside and through the state, to create forms of collective ownership in opposition to, or perhaps more accurately to reclaim economic space from, capitalist social relations. If we understand capitalism as built upon the three pillars of the wage relationship, private property relations and the market, all forms of collective ownership that seek to disturb and intervene in these spheres should come into our analysis” (p.7).

Most urgently, Cumbers wants to find answers to the question of how (new) types of public ownership can lead to the (re-) emergence of alternative discourses embedded in, and built around, social justice. In this sense *Reclaiming Public Ownership* makes an important and extremely welcome addition to the current literature. I will elaborate on the reasons behind this conclusion more fully by paying close attention to a select number of central arguments

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developed throughout the book, while also offering a more general appraisal of its structure and content.

Reclaiming Public Ownership is divided into three main parts: ‘Public ownership and its discontents’; ‘The return of public ownership’; and ‘Remaking public ownership’. Part one is developed with excellent academic rigour and insight, beginning with a critique of the post-1945 legacy of public ownership within Britain, moving on to the onslaught of neoliberalism and the politics of privatisation, and ending by dissecting Hayekian-inspired critiques of public ownership as state centralized planning. Looking back through these well-thumbed chapters, I note the extensive pencil marks - rigorous underlining, exclamation marks, *triple* exclamation marks! Without fear of exaggeration, each page contains some notable insight, statistic, quote and/or argument that will be referred back to again, and again. In particular, the manner in which Cumbers lays bare popular Hayekian caricatures of public ownership, by critical reference to other forms of state ownership which are captured by the communist regimes (effectively examples of ‘state capitalism’) experienced in the Soviet Union (after 1917), and China (after 1949), is excellent.

Part two begins by addressing the financial crisis, and the rediscovery of the state in the neoliberal heartland. It opens with reference to a memorable speech by Gordon Brown (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) to the City of London Corporation. Brown’s speech begins: “My Lord Mayor, we will not forget that the *first and foremost* duty of government is to maintain and indeed to strengthen monetary and fiscal stability” (quoted on p.85, emphasis added). What follows is a devastating critique of the New Labour project, which “epitomized the broader shift made by many social democrats in the 1990s to accommodate themselves with the ‘new realities’ of globalisation, absorbing the politics of TINA, and learning to love the free market and big business” (p.86). The emphasis on TINA (‘there is no alternative’ - attributed to Margaret Thatcher) is important. The idea that the bizarre utopia called capitalism is our *least worst* option is an extraordinarily powerful one in narrowing our political-economic imaginary, and closing down possibilities for change. In unpacking the mythology that underpins the propaganda machine of the market, private enterprise and

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competition (*etc.*), *Reclaiming Public Ownership* plays a crucial role in making space for new perspectives and ideas to take root.

While laudable, interrogating the economic imaginary and telling new stories is no longer a sufficient end in itself. Cumbers is concerned that we move beyond mere analysis of the economic and financial crises, and instead turn our critical faculties toward developing “an agenda that might feed into mainstream discourses to counter three decades of market imperialism, and a deeply ingrained sense of the benefits of private ownership” (p.3). For Cumbers, this agenda can be envisaged in a way that appeals to non-orthodox Marxist traditions of political economy. Such a revised interpretation of Marxism is likely to be controversial, and Cumbers is all-too aware of this, noting that “While the current work is in the spirit of Marx it is probably not in the manner that many of his adherents, past and present, would choose or agree with” (p.213) *Reclaiming Public Ownership* certainly makes a convincing account of the limits of orthodox Marxist approaches, evident in centralized and planned vision of socialism, for example. Elsewhere, Cumbers calls for those on the left “... to come to terms with the limits to Marxist thinking, its agoraphobia and its neglect of the relations between knowledge, pluralism and a genuine economic democracy” (p.211).

In chapter 6, Cumbers surveys ‘the commons’ noting that it is:

“frequently evoked as a more democratic, participatory and horizontal model of ownership...which at the same time respects local difference and diversity of ownership forms against the prescriptive one-size-fits-all models of market-driven capitalism or statist socialism/social democracy. Following on from this, a further critical aspect of the contemporary commons literature is the rejection of the classical Marxist revolutionary call for a vanguard to smash capitalism. Instead the radical project today is to construct autonomous spaces outside capitalism in the here and now - *i.e.* prefigurative - rather than a once-and-for-all future revolutionary uprising to overthrow capitalism through an assault on the state” (p.128).

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Cumbers looks at the Zapatista movement as one of the most celebrated examples of contemporary commons practice, and expands the discussion to address the resurgence of commoning in the global North, from longer-standing cooperative organization to local currencies, time banks, community gardening and so on. As someone who is very much influenced by anarchist praxis, and has sought to identify and harness crypto-anarchist spaces of work and organisation, I found this to be particularly interesting and important.

However, Cumbers emphatically rejects the (autonomist) idea that alternative forms of commoning can develop by avoiding engagement with the state and its institutional structures. How is it possible to “move from the micro cracks - the autonomous spaces - that are emerging in the interstices of capitalism to something that begins to join up these cracks” (p.135)? This is indeed a serious and important point of reflection, and the book’s sections on “the impossibility of autonomy” and “the limits to commons thinking” (p.136) will certainly stimulate greater thought, and debate around this, and related issues. Ultimately, can the state be disregarded as a sphere of political engagement for an anti-capitalist politics? For Cumbers, “the pursuit of autonomy and a commons requires on-going struggle with state and capitalist actors rather than the evacuation to some kind of purified outside space” (p.137). This conclusion is reached given Cumbers’ perception of “the failure of the alter-globalization movement to dent the power of traditional state structures and corporate hierarchies” (p.138). In such a reading the appeal to more networked, decentred and democratic forms of politics becomes “a lofty aspiration rather than a more sober assessment of realities” (*ibid.*). Cumbers cites the failure of the Zapatistas to engage with “what they see as [the Mexican state’s and other Left parties’] corrupt and verticalist practices” (*ibid.*) as a self-defeating strategy. Such dis-engagement has effectively meant that they have been “unable to broaden...[their] base to appeal to the masses of Mexican society while global capitalism continues to make inroads in the Chiapas” (*ibid.*).

Reclaiming Public Ownership contains a range of open criticisms that problematise flat(ter), horizontalist politics. Among other things those advocating a horizontalist politics are accused of wilfully/necessarily appealing to a false set of distinctions (for example, the

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binary oppositions between state and society, horizontalism and verticalism, and durable institutional structures and transient liberated spaces). It is worth quoting the conclusions that Cumbers draws from all this:

“Whilst the criticism of bureaucratic, centralized forms of public ownership, shorn of democracy and participation and disrespectful of localist and commons traditions, holds in many cases, does that mean that we write off state ownership as a potential space for anti-capitalist forms of collective ownership? For me, the answer is clearly no. Projects of state ownership were rarely reducible to capitalist values of profit accumulation and were often part of more alternative programmes of reform and development that pursued different values such as national development and the provision of universal services (such as electricity, water supplies, telephone communications, transport infrastructures, *etc.*) which did dramatically improve and enhance the quality of life for the vast majority of working-class people” (p.140).

Given this reading it therefore becomes necessary to develop a commons that engages with those strategies that can “expand and upscale these practices and values to higher levels through engagement with reconstituted forms of state ownership. A genuine anti-capitalist politics is one that seeks to take back public ownerships from capital rather than the false prospectus of exodus offered by some branches of autonomism” (p.141).

Part three considers a range of possible ways in which this understanding of public ownership could be used as a means to secure progressive ends. Here I would suggest that considerable debate can be had concerning the *desirability* of certain forms of state ownership to be retained and employed as a means to secure progressive ends. That said, the arguments given here are interesting and carefully explained. Cumbers believes that a more democratised model of public ownership would be one that reflected five key principles: tackling social justice as class justice; a commitment to distributed economic power; tolerance, tradition and heterodox thinking; promoting knowledge, innovation and

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deliberation in economic practice; and the importance of dialogue, pluralism and diversity in creating government democracy. Cumbers also invites close attention to the ‘spatial imagination’ within alternative economic strategies. While disappointing to see an improbably homogeneous reading of anarchism, autonomous thinking and much radical green economics - all are said to share a “somewhat romanticized view of the local level as the key scale for forging radical democracy and social justice” (p.156) - the argument that “there needs to be a more nuanced appreciation of the dynamic nature of spatial organization and governance under advanced capitalism...” (*ibid.*) is nonetheless extremely valid.

The passionate and wholehearted nature in which Cumbers commits to the difficult task of showing what a reconstituted and pluralistic approach to public ownership might look like is clear. In chapter 7, the scenarios he presents, with careful consideration of the rationales behind them, and with the implications that follow, all merit close attention. The schematic depiction of public ownership types (including full and partial state ownership, local or municipal ownership, employee-owned firms, and producer and consumer cooperatives), and how these might deliver various goals for an aspiring “eco-socialist government” (p.164), made for particularly interesting reading. No doubt I will use these arguments and scenarios to form the basis of many a class discussion in economic geography modules in future!

Drawing on his own long-running research focused on the political economy of oil (which problematizes the relations between multinationals, the state and local economies where oil development takes place), chapter 8 focuses on ‘real life’ examples of state intervention and public ownership in Norway. This very accessible and extremely interesting chapter is complemented - and contrasted - with a critical look at the remarkable growth of Denmark’s renewable energy sector between the 1970s and 2000s. Importantly, and commensurate with earlier arguments, Cumbers emphasises that this was secured by working *with* the state:

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“Denmark’s wind power revolution is neither a story of market-led growth, nor of top-down, state-driven planned developments, but instead reflects a grassroots, community-based initiative, underpinned by decentralized, cooperative and municipal ownership alongside small-scale private ownership. However, the state has not been absent in the sense that this has been a spontaneous set of autonomous grassroots developments. Instead it has played an enabling role in establishing targets and the construction of particular institutional arrangements, through rules around ownership and the setting of prices outside pure market forms...” (p.192-193).

In arguing that public ownership needs to be radically rethought in order to be relevant and appropriate to the global economy of the twenty-first century, *Reclaiming Public Ownership* manages to fit in an improbable amount of scholarly depth and rigour across its 228 pages. It is exceptionally well written throughout, and should appeal to a wide readership. As a book written in the hope of demonstrating to the reader that “democratic public ownership is not only an increasingly urgent requirement but also a practical possibility in the years ahead” (p.219) I believe that it is successful. Beyond this, though, the book acts as an important challenge and agitator. Without doubt *Reclaiming Public Ownership* will provoke and inspire action on the diagnoses, and proposals, it makes. It will certainly inspire new thoughts, responses and critical agendas to emerge. And it is for these reasons that I recommend the book without any reserve or hesitation. It should certainly be considered of great relevance to a wide range of academic, policy-making and public communities alike, particularly those based in the UK.

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