

BOOK REVIEW

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The Solidarity Economy Alternative: Emerging Theory and Practice by Vishwas Satgar

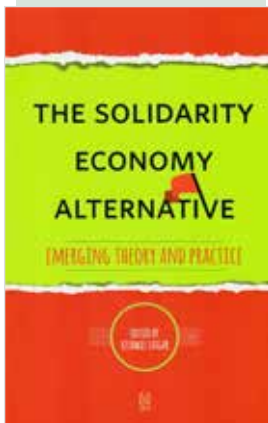
Anne Mc Lennan and Salim Latib

The 'solidarity economy' is not just an alternative, but a real possibility, rooted in a discourse on different global and local economic systems, and on collective and solidarity based economic practices, that are unfolding across the world. By bringing together a set of insightfully authored articles on the theory and practice of the solidarity economy, Vishwas Satgar succeeds in pushing the boundaries of reflection and action directed at replacing the system of global capitalism that appears to be flailing. It is a book well worth the read if you are interested in exploring alternatives to current economic practice.

Each article in the collection has been authored by individuals who are thinking through alternatives to neo-liberalism, or who are directly involved in the establishment of 'solidarity economy' networks. Despite a focus on South Africa, the collection stands as a timely contribution to the global movement against neo-liberalism. It is refreshingly different to the normal rhetorical tirade against capitalism, in that it focuses on the theory and practice of the solidarity economy alternative. No matter the reader's ideological disposition, the evidence of emergent alternatives cannot be wished away. The solidary economy exists and is growing in space and size, and for many it stands as an alternative value based terrain for economic actions, for harmony and for the full realisation of the ethos embodied in Ubuntu.

Although governments and businesses may view the collective and cooperative based economic sector as part of the social economy and as being functional for social protection in a downward economic cycle, the realities of emergent practices suggest that many within this sector are beginning to view themselves as part of a different economy and are establishing networks that serve as alternative structures for solidarity based economic interactions. This collection contains many historic and contemporary examples of communities and workers exercising power in their efforts to construct alternative modalities for survival and for economic practices that are not predicated on individualism and competitive consumption.

While the reader may struggle with the distinction made between the social economy and the solidarity economy, the collection provides valuable perspectives on how communities across the world are responding to economic failures. Insights



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from Brazil, Italy and the United States serve to create an appreciation on how struggles for survival can lead to a desire for active change in the overall structure of production, consumption and exchange. In contrast to the social economy, the solidarity economy is much more about the establishment of networks and initiatives for building collective, sustainable, democratic and caring modalities for production, exchange and consumption across communities and societies.

Part One of the collection provides interesting insights into the innovation value of collective entities and how these contribute to shaping a productive solidarity economy. If read together, the analysis of solidarity flows in Brazil by Euclides Mance (Chapter 6) and Vishwas Satgar's (Chapter 8) outline of the emergence of the solidarity economy in South Africa, provides insight into alternatives to current state centred approaches to development. Part Two is particularly valuable, as it provides comparative perspectives on the steps taken in other countries as they struggled to move towards a solidarity economy. Amongst others, the frameworks established in Brazil as part of state support may be instructive for government officials involved in policy and for those actors seeking to secure autonomy for the purposes of ensuring effective democratic participation from the bottom up.

The main value of Part Three of the book is that it captures solidarity-type economic practices that rarely feature in dialogue about alternatives in South Africa. The analysis of cooperative efforts in Ivory Park in Midrand, and of the ongoing struggle of workers to take over the Meline factory near Soweto, provides a sobering wake-up call to those unable to imagine success in worker and community owned enterprises. These initiatives demonstrate the value of a collective spirit and social values in the face of ongoing challenges. This struggle towards a 'solidarity economy' is aptly captured by a spray painted sign on the wall of the Meline factory that reads 'All Bosses are Fired' (Chapter 11). Taken at a global level, the struggle to establish an alternative may also be conceived as central to the efforts of social movements to democratise through the establishment of an alternative economic path.