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BOOK REVIEW

Peter North (2006) *Alternative Currency Movements as a Challenge to Globalisation? A Case Study of Manchester's Local Currency Networks.* Ashgate Publishing Limited and Ashgate Publishing Company (Economic Geography Series), Aldershot, UK & Burlington, Vermont. 186 pp; ISBN 0-7546-4591-6; £47,50

This book by Peter North is based on the ethnography of three different local currency experiences led in Manchester, UK, during the mid 1990's. It takes the reader to the heart of the LETS members' visions and motivations while at the same time it emphasizes the ways local and national contexts and actors have influenced the relative success or failure (according to their specific goals) of these ventures. The book is divided in two parts. The first part presents the conceptual and methodological framework used to conduct the study, as well as the local context in which Manchester LETS were created. The second part presents the findings of the study, which included eight months of fieldwork in 1995 as well as subsequent follow up visits in 1996, 2001 and 2005.

The introduction gives a rapid overview of different and significant alternative currency experiments that have materialized in America and Europe during the 20th century, such as LETS system, Ithaca Hours and the Wir Bank. It also identifies different ways parallel currencies have been approached by academics: as a means to tackle unemployment and social exclusion; as a technology that helps recreate community ties; as a way of regulating the economy so it is re-embedded in social and moral values or as a line of attack against global capitalism through promoting sustainable and local development. Taking into account that these understandings of LETS were formulated when the movement was still young, the aim of North's study was to « observe the extent to which the benefits LETS claim it can deliver are realisable from day-to-day participation on a micro-political basis; and the extent to which the local rules by which LETS works are internally consistent, thereby allowing alternative lifestyles to be lived irrespective of the actions of elites » (p. 29).

Chapter two sets out the study's conceptual framework, which is informed by different social movement theories. It draws on the resource mobilization theory and the political opportunity structure approach, associated with the study of more traditional, class-oriented movements, as well as on the framing perspective and the more post-modern approach which proposes a cultural interpretation of social movements. On the methodological side, authors such as Touraine and Melucci have inspired a general strategy (described in chapter three), based on fieldwork, which mobilise an array of data collecting and analyzing techniques including

participant observation as well as individual and group interviews. Touraine's « sociological intervention », for example, is used as a method which, through focus groups involving active members of the studied movement, helps understand the degree to which they agree on stakes, claims and opponents; in other words, if they recognize themselves as a social movement that, by definition, seeks to achieve the « (...) social control of historicity in a concrete community ». Melucci's suggestion of investigating the way alternative identities are created throughout collective action, without overlooking the different points of view that can divide participants, is assumed as well. Another theoretician whose conceptual approach is taken into account is Foucault. His conception of power « as web » is mobilised in order to investigate the limits historically structured local forces, and not only the State, impinge upon LETS as they try to expand and become a significant part of an alternative lifestyle.

Chapter four is a description of the « political opportunity structure », in other words, the economic and political situation and conflicts that coloured Manchester's local scene during the 1990's. North uses three metaphors in order to present the interpretive frames different group of actors have developed in order to diagnose the problems lived by the city's population as well as their suggested solutions: « Labour Manchester» refers to the position of the Left; « Entrepreneurial Manchester», to a liberal- conservative position and «Madchester», to a multi cultural vision of the city. In this chapter North identifies the networks from which Manchester LETS, founded under a conservative local government in the 1990's, found most of its allies and membership, that is the Labour Party but also the greens and DIY (do-it-yourself) anarchists. This blending of different political tendencies would be a hallmark of the LETS.

The three LETS initiatives studied by North in Manchester are presented in chapter five. The first is the Manchester LETS, a « traditional » local exchange scheme that grew really rapidly after its launch in 1992 (up to 550 members in 1995). From the beginning, North's narration gives the reader a sense of the conflicts over frames which led to the compromise, labelled as a libertarian *ethos*, that had to be attained in order to be able to function as an exchange system. He also describes the functioning of the scheme, with details about the division of administrative labour, turnover, its local currency (the Bobbin), and activities organized by the LETS. The second initiative that was examined by the author is LETSGo. This experiment was aiming at rapidly spreading the use of local currencies over the city not only amongst people but also amongst businesses, churches and other organizations. North explains that in this case, the idea was framed differently than in the Manchester LETS' case, with a stronger emphasis on the commercial aspect of trading with an alternative currency. As North explains, the plans did not work as was expected. Hattersley LETS is the third and last initiative studied by North. Implemented by members of the Manchester LETS in a low-income suburban residential estate where inner-city dwellers had been relocated, it never really worked: catalogues were distributed twice but no trading occurred.

The following two chapters present the results of the «sociological intervention » like focus groups that were held during the author's fieldwork. Motivations and political agendas are analyzed and the diversity of projects supported by participants becomes evident. Chapter six is structured around the question of collective identity. Starting with an investigation of the motivations of the members of all three Manchester LETS, it rapidly leads to the political dimensions of the mobilisation process and to the identification of different and conflicting frames of interpretation among participants. Two central tendencies are identified. On one side, we have the « transformers» and, on the other, the « heterotopians ». « Transformers » consider LETS as a value-free financial instrument that can be mobilized to develop an

alternative and more humane economy without having to deconstruct the mainstream economy. « Heterotopians » are aiming at changing the capitalist society, and for them LETS represent a concrete way to defend counter-hegemonic ideas about work, money, and lifestyles. Heterotopia, a Foucauldian notion, refers to an « alternative yet impossible space » (p. 92), a prefigurative experiment in which activists can live in limited versions of their utopias, within the present system, instead of waiting for a revolutionary change of system. Analysis of these two perspectives, their values and claims, leads North to distinguish four intermediary positions on the continuum between strongly transformative and strongly « heterotopian » members : a « LETS as value-free instrument » position, a « humanising the economy » position, a « greening » position and a « greening anarchist politics » position. Manchester LETS, then, are considered as a heterogeneous social movement, a « contested space » themselves. This nuanced and well illustrated analysis is clearly anchored in the conceptual framework that was explained earlier and as such, is exemplary from a methodological perspective. Chapter seven asks if members see LETS as a social movement. If so, do they consider they can, as Melucci puts it, « break the limits of the system »? In order to answer these questions, North relies mostly on the debates that he could observe *in situ* during focus groups he organized with LETS members. He concludes that the core values expressed by LETS members do represent an ideological challenge to capitalist values but not all members consider that LETS challenge the system or break the mainstream.

In chapters eight and nine, North addresses the relation between LETS and public policy. Chapter eight's objective is to relocate Manchester LETS within their larger context, in order to see if they have the potential to spread outside of their constitutive networks and thus act as a transformative social movement. Described here are the strategies and actions that were put forward in order to try to convince the local business sector and other institutional actors to acknowledge LETS potential for local or sustainable development. The participation of LETS members in the Local Agenda 21 initiative is treated as an illustrative case that shows that conflicting positions between members leads to ineffective action. Poverty and social exclusion in the inner-city is the subject of chapter nine, in which the author analyzes, basically, why the less subversive time banks were preferred over LETS as a policy instrument that could help to deal with these problems.

In chapter 10, the author considers the benefits attributed to LETS by their promoters: are they realisable? Do LETS really work on a different logic than the one that governs capitalist markets as some of them assert? Can members of LETS really create and, mostly, live by the alternative cultural codes they put forward in their discourse? Here North relies on Foucault and his conception of the limits structural forces impinge upon micro-politics in order to qualify LETS as either a « heterotopia », a temporary « heterotopia » or a « baudrillardian sign », that is an unrealized utopia. Alternative conceptions of money, work and community that lie at the centre of LETS members' claims are contrasted to the ones that permeate their day-to-day life. Once again, the picture North comes up with is contrasted since members interpret their use of local currency in different ways. Some see it only as a way of gaining access to services, so it does not change much the way they value work or community ties. Others, the most active traders, can get closer to living alternative lifestyles as far as work and community are concerned, although conventional money still maintains a major role in their daily lives.

The author concludes that since they work at the micro level and face structural constraints, LETS *per se* can not « break the system », but nevertheless represent a form of micro-political mobilisation against local and specific power relations. They are good at illuminating

« previously hidden power relations » (p. 172) through day-to-day activities and as such their critical dimension is important. They also have success in creating social ties in limited territories and are a proof that, to a certain extent, things can be done in a different manner, albeit in a limited sphere, without intervention from the State. Thus, they can be considered as a form of struggle against globalization since they counter the claim, associated to neoliberal capitalist policies, that « there is no alternative ».

Summary

This book contains a rich description and analysis of local power, politics and social innovation, thanks to pertinent fieldwork and a good mix of data collection techniques. A rigorous treatment of the data leads to a well written and lively text, where interview excerpts are very informative about LETS members' comprehension of their own actions.

This book will be of interest to researchers and activists interested in unveiling the complex interplay between personal motives, changing collective identities and local power and is a rather an academic book.

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