



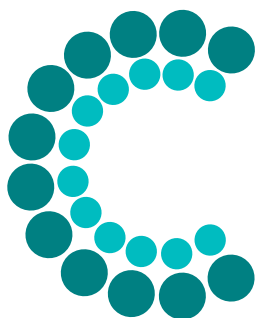
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BOOK REVIEWS

**THE HERETIC'S GUIDE TO GLOBAL FINANCE,
HACKING THE FUTURE OF MONEY BY BRETT
SCOTT. LONDON: PLUTO PRESS, 2013. PP. IX + 272;
INDEX. £11.50 (PAPERBACK). ISBN
9780745333502.¹**

Discussions about the financial system reveal two sets of perspectives. Financial experts, bank CEOs and politicians adopt a technical discourse that seems alienating and superficial to critical academics, NGO campaigners and environmental activists who are often influenced by schools of thought ontologically located outside the financial system. With 'The Heretic's Guide to Global Finance: Hacking the Future of Money', Scott aims at 'radicalizing reform and reforming radicals' (p.1), by empowering individuals of the latter group. Based on his first-hand anthropological observations, Scott wrote a two-in-one book, combining a course on the inner workings of finance with various forms of subversive financial activism.

Scott takes his readers on a tour of a financial city. He equips them with a 'map' helping them to orientate among the financial monuments, and showing how these are cleverly connected. The reader is then invited to take a sneak peek behind the doors of the financial institutions and become familiar with the local culture. Finally, the guide presents a series of alternative 'routes' allowing the reader to escape being a 'financial tourist'. This, in a nutshell, is the threefold structure adopted by Scott.

The first part of the book presents a didactic course on the components of the financial ecosystem. Issues explored include: How does a hedge fund relate to an investment bank, what is the difference between derivatives and swaps? Before discussing any technicalities, Scott lays the groundwork by giving some practical advice: put on your financial goggles and embrace some basic exploration principles (i.e. push away fear, forget theories, etc.) and cultivate some good habits (e.g. read the financial papers etc.).

Following this challenging exploratory trip, the second part of the book, 'Jamming', reads almost like a novel. The

author's insights from his time as a derivative broker move beyond stereotypes, reveal the unspoken values of the financial world, and deconstruct the serious image that bankers like to project. For example, Scott highlights the risk illusion: while investment bankers might claim that they are paid (a lot) to take risks, Scott argues, on the contrary, that choosing to work for a reputed financial institution shows risk aversion: 'the cleaner at Morgan Stanley has probably been exposed to far greater personal risk in her life than the average derivatives dealer whose desks she vacuums under' (p.123).

This section also presents the anthropological methodology Scott used in his 'financial exploration' or 'going gonzo' into the City. However, Scott does not mention the risk he was exposed to in 'going native in the world of finance', i.e., by identifying too much with the individuals of his study, so that, as Luyendijk in his Guardian banking blog puts it, 'after a while in the jungle of Papua New Guinea, human sacrifice begins to look pretty reasonable'.

The third part of the book, 'Building', adopts a hacker outlook (combining rebellion with re-writing) to spur creativity towards more positive models of finance. Ranging from banking reforms to crowd-funding, the financial innovations presented are purposely blurrily grouped to include both mainstream reformist strategies ('building Trojan horses') and radically alternative ones ('DIY finance'). Scott argues against the rejection of 'mainstream-friendly' innovations but notes that these 'need constant radical input, otherwise they end up as tame rocking-horses for use in photo-shoots with Goldman Sachs' (p.228).

The book subtitle, 'Hacking the Future of Money', seems to refer to Lietaer's (2001) 'The Future of Money: Beyond Greed and Scarcity', which would have implied a deeper analysis of the structural difficulties posed by creating money through interest-bearing bank debt, which, unfortunately, the book does not adequately deliver. Scott warns the reader through his introduction that he did not choose the 'what is wrong' approach; such an approach would have made it harder to convince the reader that financial regimes can be leveraged for positive ends. Examples of

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disastrous consequences of financial activities are, thus, only to be found in the book as passing anecdotes. This leaves the reader wondering – at times – why one should get involved in financial activism other than for fun and a quasi-Robin Hood feel.

One also could have expected a larger section on complementary currencies. They are, arguably, the most transformative forms of alternative finance, because they alter the cell of the monetary system: money. Calling complementary currencies aficionados ‘monetary mystics’, Scott notes that ‘they operate in the world in full knowledge that money is a powerful societal convention, and undertake hacking exercises into the fabric of such collective illusions’ (p.228). A second edition, which would be welcome to keep this useful guide up-to-date, could expand this section.

Finally, while the book aims at bridging a gap by ‘radicalizing reforms and reforming radicals’ (p.1), it is not targeted at mainstream financial professionals, and as it only brings one group to the middle of the bridge, it is more likely to reform radicals than to radicalize reform. Indeed, Scott believes that anthropological approaches help activists in a situation of asymmetric power by breaking down the self vs. other divide, thereby spreading access.

Irrespective of the abovementioned shortcomings, ‘The Heretic’s Guide to Global Finance’ is not just a very instructive book, but a true guide to be consulted regularly by everyone who is concerned about the power of the financial system. It provides an understanding of the financial world, sharpens its critique, and pragmatically opens new doors for action. The book is extremely well-documented, including references to research projects, YouTube videos, online forums, etc. and plenty of suggestions for adventure lovers who could be seduced by the idea of putting on a suit and doing some ‘urbex’ in the City.

Above all, the anthropological outlook of the author is quite unique. There is a broad literature on alternative forms of production, consumption and exchange, guided by social and environmental objectives and based on collective ownership, reciprocity and democratic self-management. This literature (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006, Hart et al. 2010) departs from real world practices to grasp a systemic model or trajectory of transformative change, illustrated by the term Social and Solidarity Economy – or Solidarity Finance when it focusses on social forms of financing. Instead, Scott stays at the micro-level, puts on his anthropological lens and examines social patterns and practices revolving around both financial regimes and financial activism. He looks at how people create meaning (see the section on the ‘Bitcoin’), brings into consideration gender imbalances, and tries to make sense of bizarre behaviors (see the ‘deal making tribes’ section).

Overall, Scott re-humanizes and diversifies the image of finance and arouses his reader’s curiosity. He has succeeded in writing a book about finance without being dull or alarmist, but fun and exciting. His irreverent and ‘colour-

ful’ writing style and his ‘cool’ references make this a ‘fresh’ and dynamic book.

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ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES AND SPACES: NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

EDITED BY HANS-MARTIN ZADEMACH AND SEBASTIAN HILLEBRAND. BIELEFELD: TRANSCRIPT, 2013. PP.VII + 156. INDEX. £14.75 (PAPERBACK). ISBN 3837624986 AND 978-3837624984.²

This edited collection provides a nuanced contribution to literature on alternative economies through the analysis of practices and organisations like credit unions, alternative currencies, fair trading, second-hand shopping and social enterprises. The editors highlight in chapter 1 (pp.9-22) that the five substantive chapters included in this collection address two major foci. The first concerns moving beyond binary thinking or 'fixed taxonomic categories' (p.20) when it comes to enacting and theorising alternative socio-economic practices. The second focus includes considering the 'distinctive significance of space and difference in economic cultures and practices in our uneven world' (p.22). When it comes to these two goals, the book is most successful at achieving the first. All of the five substantive chapters effectively show the complexity of alternative socio-economic practices by avoiding binary categorisations that tend to pit revolutionary change against reformist approaches to remedy the worst injustices of capitalism.

The first chapter (pp.9-22), written by the editors themselves, provides a helpful outline of two broad ways of theorising alternative socio-economic practices. They describe these as firstly, the 'political economy' approach, and secondly, a post-structuralist approach best exemplified by the work Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and the Community Economies Collective. While the introductory chapter is relatively brief, it covers these key theoretical debates in an accessible way that would be particularly useful for people new to the area, or students wanting a theoretical overview.

In my view, four of the five substantive chapters effectively contributed to better understanding the contextual nature of alternative socio-economic practices. North and Weber's account of the Chiemgau alternative currency (chapter 3, pp.43-68) contributes to discussions around the scaling-up of alternative regional currencies, and illustrates how these intersect with universal currencies like the Euro. North and Weber effectively show how the Chiemgauer currency draws on regional identity narratives that contributed to the relative success of this alternative. This chapter highlights the importance of being attentive to the every-day dynamics and contexts that shape alternative socio-economic practices to better understand how and why people become invested in participating.

I also appreciated the nuanced contributions by: Jonas on credit unions (Chapter 2, pp.23-42), Goodman and Bryant on fair trade/second hand shopping (Chapter 5,

pp.85-112), and Huybrechts on social enterprises (Chapter 6, pp.113-130). Jonas effectively shows how some credit unions in the United Kingdom have scaled-up and repositioned themselves as alternatives to mainstream banks, rather than just the last resort for the economically marginalised. Goodman and Bryant discuss the ethical ambiguities that play out in the alternative retailing spaces of fair trade and Oxfam charity stores. They suggest that fair trade enables Northern consumers to practice more ethical consumption, yet fails to address environmental costs associated with the transportation of goods. They juxtapose this example against Oxfam charity stores where, somewhat paradoxically, profits go to charitable development initiatives in the Global South, yet Northern consumers still benefit from the very products that have often been produced through the exploited labour of those in the South. Huybrechts explores how social enterprises and innovations that seek to make mainstream capitalist practices more equitable can, at times, lose their radical potential, becoming de-politicised by actors invested in maintaining the status-quo.

Unfortunately, while this book effectively points to the significance of place in understanding alternative socio-economic practices outside of binary framings, all of the examples included were from European contexts. Including examples from the Global South or non-European settings would have added helpful perspectives to further the aims of the book by illustrating the wider range of contexts in which alternatives are enacted.

On a related point, Fickey and Hanrahan recently (2014) suggested that in many discussions around alternatives to mainstream capitalism, little has been mentioned about the role of gender. For instance, why might women or men be drawn more to certain alternatives, or be more likely to engage in them through necessity? While in Chapter 1 Zademach and Hillebrand (pp.10) hint at how participation might be more of a necessity for some, as well as how many feminists argue that this is more the case for women than men, none of the chapters explicitly discussed this aspect. At certain points, and throughout various chapters, I wanted to know more about how aspects of gender and class were influencing who engaged in these alternatives. Apart from Jonas' chapter on credit unions (pp.23-42) I was, at times, left with the impression that in many of the examples, participation was an ethical luxury, rather than a necessity which some people desperately need. For these reasons, I would have appreciated more of an engagement with feminist-oriented literature and examples from beyond European contexts to show how alternative socio-economic practices are often highly gendered, and for many women around the world, vital to meeting everyday material needs.

Finally, while many of the chapters effectively demonstrated the importance of moving beyond binary thinking

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around alternatives and mainstream capitalism, I occasionally felt that a deeper analysis was necessitated. For example, Huybrechts (Chapter 6, pp.114-130) argues for a relatively hope-filled middle-ground by suggesting that progressive social enterprises can still produce positive social change through bridging. However, I was at times also reminded of the argument made by Vrasti (2011) who calls these practices 'caring capitalism'. She argues that these kinds of practices can actually hinder wider social change by reducing the worst injustices of capitalism, thereby stopping people becoming so desperate and disillusioned that they remain invested in capitalist practices.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, this book is a welcome addition to the alternative economics literature, and would be helpful for students, academics and practitioners. Many of the examples in the book effectively show how alternative practices actually work on the ground while connecting these everyday practical concerns to theoretical debates about the scaling-up of alternatives, avoiding parochial localisms, and moving beyond binary thinking in relation to alternatives versus mainstream capitalism. In this way, the book clearly illustrates the complexity and various ethical negotiations facing those of us interested in alternative socio-economic practices. And, as Huybrechts (Chapter 6, pp.113-130) helpfully points out, using the term 'new', doesn't necessarily mean these kinds of practices have not existed in other times or places. But, rather, that we can borrow from history and re-work these alternatives in contemporary contexts to create more equitable societies and livable lives.

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