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Book Review: John Asimakopoulos: Social Structures of Direct Democracy: On Political Economy of Equality

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A Book Review by Susan Cruise, Ph.D., University of South Carolina Lancaster

Social Structures of Direct Democracy: *On Political Economy of Equality* by: John Asimakopoulos. Chicago, IL, Haymarket Press. 2014. 213 pages

Social Structures of Direct Democracy: On Political Economy of Equality by: John Asimakopoulos is part of a peer-reviewed “Studies in Critical Social Science” book series, which offers insight into power relationships that exist under capitalism and how this has defined global society and its ascendancy. Asimakopoulos writes a provocative book on the oppressive economic inequality that currently exists and continues to be perpetuated in America largely unchallenged.

The corruption of the political economy in the U.S.—how the most disadvantaged in this country are among those who are the most economically exploited is uniquely exposed in this text. Among many examples of this illustrated in the book are: employers offering such low wages that their workers can qualify (though they are often discouraged to apply) for Medicaid; loan perpetrators offering sub-prime, high-interest loans to individuals who eventually lose their homes to foreclosure when they cannot pay the fees; breaking unions (such as the case of airline pilots) who now work for so little, they have become part of the working poor. Their salaries are low enough to qualify them for food stamps. And yet these crimes go unnoticed because the wealthy own the mass media corporations and can therefore influence the knowledge the public is exposed to.

The arguments of Asimakopoulos’ book are both eye-opening as well as unapologetic in its claims against the guise of the success of capitalism for all people in America. His book uncovers how, among industrialized countries, the United States has the greatest gap between the rich and poor with the richest 1% owning 33.8 percent of the countries’ wealth compared to 2.5 percent of ownership for the lowest half of the US population. This begs one to question if the U.S. can achieve any greater degree of inequality and still remain a prosperous country.

According to Joseph Stiglitz (p. 6), systems based on high levels of inequality (as in the United States), lead to *reduced* economic efficiency and productivity. Asimakopoulos argues for social reform that moves in the direction of social equality. In order to make strides toward greater equality and a political and social system that will work for all citizens, he argues that the U.S. should look to increase efficiencies and automation. The benefit to people would be in multiple areas of life including general health, life expectancy, and quality of life beyond market economies where efficiency and output are measures of being successful. Karl Marx referred to this as “life chances”.

The text’s focus on how the political, economic and social systems in America influence the common man is a notable strength of this reading. This comes with a challenge for each person, regardless of status, to examine their ideology and whether it is based on division and scarcity or on solidarity and lack of need. Asimakopoulos argues that “When a society is founded on possession, its relationships will be between those who are possessors and those who are possessed. The possessed will not dream of ‘freedom’, but of becoming possessors.” (p.2)

The author’s use of divergent theories, historical relevance as well as relatable statistical data to illustrate the arguments he makes is another aspect of this text to appreciate. Asimakopoulos is unapologetic in his critique of anti-democratic capitalism, but is not dependent on a single ideology or isolated logic of social and political theory to inform his thoughts on this topic.

But a critical look causes one to question the place at which theory can be applicable. While theoretically, Asimakopoulos’ arguments are compelling, it leaves the reader to ponder whether alternatives to current capitalism are achievable in America. Do the text’s practical recommendations for change in the fabric of our broken capitalism come with concrete possibilities, or do they remain theoretical? For the reader, and especially the student, this text will offer a rich opportunity for challenging the status quo of the social, political and economic structure that is upheld and justified in the minds and ideology of many Americans.