

Book Review – John Weaver

Humanising Work

Co-operatives, credit unions and the challenge of mass unemployment

Chris Beales

Rainmaker Books Milton Keynes, 2013, paperback, 79 pp, £5.99, ISBN 978-1-909863-02-6

The theme of this book exploring a humanising of work is an important one in today's world. In a society dominated by the pressures of market forces and the central business principle of 'the bottom line', that is, maximising profit, the majority of workers find themselves undervalued and their work experience oppressive or boring.

Chris Beales brings the passion of a Christian minister, community activist and campaigner to the subject of employment and unemployment in UK communities today. He draws on his understanding and engagement with the Mondragon Cooperatives of the Basque region of Spain together with his involvement in community projects concerned with manufacture, education, and finance.

The underlying theme of the humanisation of work is commendable and provides a variety of examples of the benefits of cooperatives in conditions and remuneration of employees, together with opportunities for their training and future development. Some of the points identified by Beales are helpfully explored by Richard Weaver's article in this issue of FiBQ on the Living Wage.

It is surprising that Beales pays no attention to unpaid work, where carers often feel the most undervalued members of society.

There is much in this book to inspire the reader to search for more information and take local action in the development of locally-based cooperatives. Beales does not provide a simple message of positive happy-ever-after stories. There is a realism of the problems faced by the various co-operatives described, both small scale initiatives and the larger Mondragon Fagor Electrodomésticos, which collapsed in 2013, and the UK

Cooperative Bank which had to undergo major restructuring and a loss of cooperative status in 2014.

I am sure that readers will find nuggets of challenge, encouragement and inspiration within this short text, but may also share this reviewer's frustration with the lack of background detail and theological reflection.

The structure of the book is clear, but the argument is not so apparent with abrupt moves from one subject or illustration to another. One might also question some of the personal anecdotes such as the four page (pp 25-28) digression into a reflection on the Basque region and its people. What might have proved more useful would have been a reflection on the culture and society of the Basque people and whether or not this contributed to the successful development of cooperative initiatives.

Amongst all the helpful descriptions of cooperative industrial and community-based programmes the main deficiency is a lack of detailed description and analysis of the initial set-up and ongoing development of the projects identified. To aid the

inspired reader it would be useful to understand the steps taken, the problems encountered, the decisions made and the lessons learned.

From a Christian Church perspective, even though the author does address the Church as a 'cooperative', it would be useful to have further theological reflection of where cooperatives fit within the economy and Kingdom of God.

Overall this book is a useful starting place for those interested in cooperatives, and will inspire them to seek out further information and texts. 

