

Another world is possible (possibly)

Life Without Money edited by Anitra Nelson & Frans Timmerman (Pluto Press)

Reviewed by Hall Greenland

In 2003 the cultural critic Fredric Jameson famously observed that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The bad news is that the first part of that observation is now even truer: the degradation of our ecosystem has accelerated in some important respects.

The better news is that the second part is no longer as true as it was. People are again imagining the end of capitalism. The book under review is part of a growing genre of post-capitalist imaginings. Clearly the recent and continuing failures of capitalism are feeding this search for alternatives. But another and more compelling reason is that people are making the link between planetary eco-disasters and consumer capitalism. All ten contributors to this remarkable book insist on the link between the current economic system — with its money, markets and insatiable growth — and the exhausting of the planet. While other books spell this out more persuasively, the purpose of this collection is to begin to tease out the possibilities of a different economy and a sustainable relationship between society and nature.

All their prescriptions emphasise more democracy, local and regional self-sufficiency, more exchanges not dependant on money, and global equality and sharing. The contributors do this from a variety of starting points. While Ariel Salleh, for instance, draws inspiration from earlier and indigenous societies, John O'Neill (Professor of Political Economy at Manchester University) takes us back to the key economic debates of a century ago when Otto Neurath argued with Friedrich Hayek about whether non-market socialism or gung-ho market capitalism offered the best road to human happiness. Over the past 30 years Hayek's neo-liberal ideas have been given a burl with the currently observable disastrous results; now might be Neurath's turn. Other contributors draw inspiration from the cooperative ideas of Kropotkin, the scattered remarks of Marx on the future society and experiments like Spanish anarchist collectives, Yugoslav self-management and 'intentional' communities.

Even when sketching out the most utopian scenarios, there is an exciting can-do optimism in *Life Without Money*. But it does underplay the challenges that face those of us who see the need for a great transformation if we are able to arrive at a just and sustainable world. One of these is to convince people in countries like Australia to accept a materially simpler lifestyle. If we are going to save the planet, the over-consumption of rich societies must end to allow development of poorer ones.

This idea (known as 'contract and converge' and widely supported by ecologists) is a big ask and involves tackling consumerism. The buying of stuff now appears to be the way many people establish their identity and status, give meaning to their lives and express themselves. It also satisfies our addiction to novelty. The authors seem to assume that a rational realisation of ecological limits will lead people to give up incessant shopping and throw themselves into free time, cooperation, art, spirituality, family life, a sense of community and equality. That's a huge assumption.

But if you thought that this search for a more sustaining life was something that only preoccupies Greens, Buddhists, radical Christians, anarchists and eco-socialists, you'd be wrong. *The Sydney Morning Herald* is now touting a 'national wellbeing index' to measure Australia's progress (or lack of it). Gross Domestic Product is only one element in the index – others being equality, education, health and the state of the environment.

When a mildly liberal newspaper is looking beyond how much stuff is sold to gauge human progress, then a book like *Life Without Money* may be the canary in the mine, signalling it's time to come up for some fresh air and new thinking.

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