

JUSTICE IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

(Reviewed by DTH, 11/10)

This is the title of a slim, packed paperback book that focuses on the negative effects of the current pattern of economic globalization and explores what we can do concretely to make economic activity more socially and environmentally just. *Justice in a Global Economy: Strategies for Home, Community and World* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) was edited by three professors of social ethics, Pamela K. Brubaker, Rebecca Todd Peters, & Laura A. Stivers. They, with nine other contributors to the book's twelve chapters, offer strategies for promoting just and sustainable communities that are resistant to neo-liberal economic globalization and that link eco-justice engagement with embodied faith. That combination is quite rare among the many books that present practical ways to become greener or to live sustainably.

The Underlying Problem being addressed: The book's editors emphasize that economic "neoliberalism" aggravates social injustice and ecological destruction by aiming for "freer international trade and investment, less social and environmental regulation for corporations, the privatization of state-owned enterprises [plus enclosure of the commons], and a decrease in social spending. Proponents believe that a market free of government regulation and intervention will promote the most economic growth, which will in turn benefit the most people. We argue that the neoliberal economic model has been detrimental to most people and to the environment."(p. 5)

In the mal-development that results from neoliberal economic policies, education and health care become less accessible, automation and outsourcing displace more workers, the rich / poor income gap widens further, and government provides fewer public goods and services. The typical pattern is the "20:80 society" where the top 20 % of the population enjoy large incomes and affluent consumption, while the other 80 % are squeezed, exploited or marginalized. [Out-of-control, deregulated financial institutions intensify the problem.] Meanwhile, Earth's biodiversity is diminished and renewable resources are used at unsustainable rates, as governments, corporations and mass media ignore biophysical limits to growth and patterns of environmental injustice.

[For a more thorough analysis, see earlier full-length books on the ethics of globalization: *In Search of the Good Life*, by Rebecca Todd Peters (Continuum, 2004) and *Globalization at What Price? Economic Change and Daily Life* (Pilgrim Press, 2001).]

A Constructive Alternative: The editors' Introduction identifies basic elements or characteristics of just and sustainable societies (summarized on pp. 7-8), and then invites readers to explore a set of strategies for promoting this better future animated by a vision of hope and transformation informed by Christian faith. In constructively challenging all who are tempted to think that they can do little to resist injustice, the body of the book presents strategies for living justly in a global economy.

Twelve brief chapters are "divided into three parts – household, community, and public policy – because these are the three arenas where social change occurs" (p. 9) and sustainable community is built. Issues discussed in particular chapters are actually approachable in all three arenas, but each author was asked to focus on one particular

arena and to offer concrete examples of engagement “for ease of comprehension and activism.” Discussion questions plus short listings of related web sites and educational resources conclude all chapters to stimulate informed action-reflection.

Household strategies focus on supporting community farming, eating intentionally, consuming responsibly, and relating to household labor.

Community strategies explore ways to hold corporations accountable, to engage environmental justice, to revitalize local communities, and to create a commons.

Public policy strategies involve promoting solidarity with migrants, ensuring sustainability, reforming global economic policies impacting debtor countries, and questioning our basic assumptions.

Taken together, the chapters of *Justice in a Global Economy* provide important examples of ways to build just and sustainable community through initiatives inspired by visionary people, drawing on the resources of civil society including church groups, to embody eco-justice values.

Insights from some of the Chapters:

“[Let’s focus on] three areas of particular interest to households -- cost, bodies, and quality of eating practices. Elements of the Christian vision that correspond to these are that the cost of food production and eating be justly distributed; that the creation be cared for sustainably; that we honor our bodies; and that we delight in the goodness and relationships [of] our lives.” *Shannon Jung, Eating Intentionally*

“In the context of globalized child care and housework, women meet each other not only across race and class divides, but across vast oceans of privilege and opportunity. This ‘global redivision’ of women’s traditional work is changing our understanding of dependency.” *W. Anne Joh, Relating to Household Labor Justly*

“Closely related to the norm of sustainability is the norm of sufficiency... Respect for all to have enough entails limits on excess... If our relationship with nature is to be sustainable, many of us must live more simply. Thus the norm of sufficiency is aimed specifically at those of us who have bought into the frenzy of affluenza.” *Marcia Allen Owens, Consuming Responsibly*

” If we are to take seriously the dignity of persons, economic and other social institutions should empower, not exploit, humans... The Christian tradition calls us to solidarity with those persons who are marginalized by or made powerless in our economic institutions, and solidarity with other species and ecosystems that are being exploited... It is time to hold corporations accountable to particular communities and particular places.” *Laura Stivers, Holding Corporations Accountable*

“We are at home in the cosmos, and the cosmos is at home in us... Unless we begin with creation as community and the ‘standing miracle’ of life, our appraisal of land, the commons, and the environment easily falls to... non-relational consciousness toward most of the universe, together with an utterly instrumental use of life as little more than a stack of ‘resources’... Religion, morality, and ecology, as woven into daily habits, are about relationships and responsibilities that tether us to other beings and other forces.”
*Larry Rasmussen, **Creating the Commons***

“When facing an economic globalization that sees humans as objects to be commodified, whose value is based on how much they can produce and contribute to the profit margin, Christians must stand in opposition and call on values that connect the human person to God and therefore to her or his intrinsic worth... Christians must advocate ways of containing and constraining transnational corporations [whose misuse of migratory labor] nullifies our sense of the reality of justice and mercy.” *Daisy L. Machado, **Promoting Solidarity with Migrants***

“Communal virtues refer to character traits that communities exhibit... Each community that works for social change and social justice must attend to establishing, recognizing, and practicing a common set of shared virtues. It is only from these virtues that practical and reflective strategies will arise... A commitment to community virtues enables community members to weather the ups and downs associated with activism by focusing on community-sustaining practices in the wake of short-term victories and defeats.” *Carlton Waterhouse, **Engaging Environmental Justice***

“Justice and care -- two of the values inherent in a spirituality oriented toward life -- are the basis of my discussion. [Since capitalism is always a process of redistributive growth,] I am particularly concerned about distributive justice, which asks about the community’s distribution of benefits and burdens. Who benefits from the process? Who suffers? Is the process equitable? The value of care emphasizes the importance of all the activities – unpaid and paid – that keep daily life functioning. This reminds us of a broader understanding of economics, one that includes both production and social reproduction, the provisioning of life and care for the earth.” *Pamela K. Brubaker, **Reforming Global Economic Policies***

“Wealth and impoverishment are not conditions that happen at random to two separate groups. Rather, wealth is created when those who own and control business pay workers less than the value of what they produce... This understanding of impoverishment is found not only in critical economic theory, but also in the Bible – a surprise to many Christians. One of the terms for wealth used by the Hebrew prophets is *plunder* or stolen goods (see Is. 3:13-15; Jer. 22:13-17; Amos 8:4-6). Justice is a matter of... restoring to our majority sisters and brothers what the political economy has, quite legally, stolen from them.” *Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, **Challenging our Assumptions***

Reviewer's Postscript: After the Great Recession, What about Jobs?

Now, in the second decade of century 21, the editors of *Justice in a Global Economy* would certainly include a chapter on **Creating Good Jobs**. Just how to foster good work in a “tapped out” [William Greider’s term] economy like ours is complicated. The growth machine has met its match in ecological and social pathology. [See chapter 2 of Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (NY: Times Books, 2010)]

The Great Recession, following the speculative financial bubble / bust of 2006-09, has exposed severe contradictions within the reigning neoliberal economic policy consensus, and left developed Western societies, including the U.S., facing a new normal of high unemployment, larger trade deficits, and reduced public services. Tired approaches to job creation, featuring lower taxes, higher exports, job training, etc., will not meet the need.

A credible and effective job generating policy response has to involve something other than more liberalization of trade, investment, and financial speculation, less corporate accountability, deregulation of environmental protections, decreased social spending, and further privatization of government services and entities the public needs. In a society that really cares about ending massive joblessness and deep poverty among its citizens, while trying to guard against having similar economic effects on other countries, there will be no more free-rider rules for how business and finance operate. The broader national interest and the common good have priority over corporate freedom to move jobs whenever and wherever. “This is not as radical as it may sound. Every other leading industrial nation does it, one way or another. They impose limits on corporate strategy, either in formally binding ways or through political and cultural pressure, to ensure that good jobs and the best value-added production remain at home.” [W. Greider, *The End of Free-Trade Globalization*, *The Nation*, Nov. 22, 2010]

In 2009, more than half of U.S. workers were, for at least part of the year, unemployed, underemployed, discouraged from looking for nonexistent jobs, or were incarcerated. Responsive job creation and retention efforts must reach vulnerable populations and regions; new jobs must provide living wages and benefits; and the safety net must be restored for the unemployed and the poor, declared the Interfaith Worker Justice network newsletter (Fall 2010) “The issue of jobs and the economic crisis is one that faith communities are compelled to address as they face increasing distress in their pews and communities,”

Our alternative priority should be to generate sustainable livelihoods at a living wage that strengthen community and include people who are now disregarded or marginalized. This requires more **direct government action and local community initiative**. In the U.S. a billion dollars of federal subsidies for exports creates about 5000 jobs, while 100 billion dollars in federal spending creates 100,000 (that’s twice as many) jobs. Given the need to create at least 11 million new jobs over 3 years in order to reduce unemployment to 5%, government investment in public jobs for renewable energy + efficient use, infrastructure improvement, mass transit, expanded child care, toxic cleanup, education, etc., is crucial. Local community initiative to develop and support sustainable work is also essential, which brings us full circle to the subject matter of *Justice in a Global Economy*.