

Rob Paton,, with the assistance of Rainer Duhn, Silvia Gherardi, Jean-Louis Laville, Carlos Otero-Hidalgo, Robert Spear, and Ann Westenholz, *Reluctant Entrepreneurs*. Bristol, Penn.: Open University Press (U.K. distributor, Scholar's Press).

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Paton et al, a team very experienced in industrial consultation, describe the efforts and exhilaration of more than 15 sets of workers to retrieve firms, by their own investment and labor and planning, from the brink of dissolution. The firms would appear on a map to surround the coasts of Europe, that is to say mostly on the periphery. The examples are comprised of: an advertising agency, a waste consultant and also a real estate developer in Denmark, a confectioner in Scotland, a pre-cast concrete firm in Lancashire, an ESL school in Oxford, a glass manufacture, an electronics firm, a structural steel designer, and a heavy equipment manufacturer in Catalonia, a photolithographer in Verona, a manufacturer of guns in the Loire and a French sheetmetal firm and a plastics plant in Germany's Ruhr Valley.

How is this casebook pertinent to us? First, it introduces new forms of worker ownership. In capitalist North America, worker ownership of firms has arisen traditionally in two ways—either through origination of the firm as a producer cooperative (Big Carrot in BC) or through worker “inheritance” of existing firms (Shaw Brick in N.S. or Harpell in Que.). Now a third bifurcated mechanism Worker Take Over (WTO) and worker capitalism are explicated. Examples of WTOs are (Tenbec & Tricofil in Que., Lamford Forest Products in BC). Examples of “worker capitalism” (one share one vote) are yet waiting offshore (O & O Stores in Philadelphia, SAL's—labor companies—in Spain).

Secondly, the size of our worker ownership sector in Canada is substantial. There were more than 300 producer cooperatives in Quebec in 1988 (Altman 1992); Mungall gives the figure of 350 urban “Worker Co-ops” Canada wide. Quarter estimates that 100 new worker owned companies are being created each year (attrition not given). Available numbers in this field tend to be suggestive rather than exhaustive and the game is entirely changed if one aggregates these numbers with those involving Employee Stock Ownership Plans. Firms with ESOP swamp the field of producer

cooperatives. For example, in July of 1986 of the 1,011 companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange, 640 (63%) had plans which made company workers owners of company stock. (Roseman 1987). Of course by virtue of being publicly listed these companies fall outside the definition of a "Wholly Employee Owned Company", but Paton and his co-authors explain to us that viable worker control can co-exist with partial outside ownership.

In the present economic/political climate of the FTA and NAFTA, with branch plants and Canadian competitors falling like ten pins, both viable and collapsing firms are bolstered or given new life through the use of worker investment. Whatever the uses of worker investment in viable ongoing firms, the case of the collapsing firms now requires the abandoned workforce and community to consider "purchasing their jobs". Paton makes it clear that, in the European case, the community and community leaders are virtually inevitably drawn into a search for a way to save the payroll in firm closures. If the abandoned workforce does not initiate the idea of a worker buyout it is very likely that the local government will call them and their unions together to explore the use of worker funds in such a rescue.

The study by Paton et al approaches the issue of the viability of worker buy outs with little ideological bias. They do not put an idealist interpretation on success or failure of the firm or on the extent of industrial democracy achieved thereby. In creating a four quadrant chart of four "ideal" types, (Individual Ownership vs Collective Ownership, and Internal Accountability vs External Accountability) they ask what is wrong with a case falling in the center of the grid? they answer — nothing is wrong, "a combination of individual and collective ownership has some definite advantages" (p. 103). Since the Mondragon Coops fall only a little to the left of that location it is hard to disagree with them, even though some non wholly owned Employee Stock Ownership cases fall only a little to the right of the center of the chart.

Ideology does seem to help these firms to succeed, though. There is no doubt that Catalonia and Northern Italian and the Scandanavian countries are over-representad amongst the most sucessful cases. These historical centers of collective ownership clearly furnish resources and social climates which foster sucessful collective enterprises. To what extent is Canada a similar cradle for collective ownership? Is it useful to consider here that 43% of the adult Canadian population are members of some cooperative?

How successful were the cases studied? Pretty sucessful if the criteria is essentially preservation of jobs for a significant number of years following crises.¹ The firms Paton studied were exposed at least as much as any other firm to economic vagaries and considering that most were originally under capitalized, their performance in longevity is very respectable. The authors judge that Worker Take Overs "are an essentially counter-cyclical

microeconomic response worthy of some support at the start of a period of high unemployment . . . ” (p. 155). If the criteria is a blossoming of industrial democracy then only a few stories are inspiring. Larger firms choosing representation of workers are less democratic than smaller firms choosing direct democracy. One lovely story shows the shucked off worker firm outcompeting the old owner's new firm.

Worker Take Overs need help. They do best when nested in a network of other such firms and attendant financial agencies with competent consulting firms to see them through the process. In Canada examples of such networks are—the Montreal-Laval Resource group, and the Evangeline Cooperative System, a Caisse Populaire in Acadia, are a private sector aids to worker owned firms. The Société de Développement des Coopératives is a government agency providing systemic help to worker cooperatives in Quebec (Quarter & Melnyk 1989). Trade unions which are active and vigilant aid the success of WTOs.

Major problems of WTOs are: their disadvantage in bidding against corporate asset dismantlers, obsolete equipment and “market chill”, the difficulty in finding managers who are both competent and committed to democracy, and their immense problems in capitalization. They work best if initiated well before a company is terminally ill or in Paton's term “a phoenix”. This need for early diagnosis and treatment is a reason to think of ESOP type planning as having a potential to be more than the corporate grab (Weirton Steel W.Va.) which has typlified it use. Canada needs a “Right to buy your workplace” law.

For Canada, Mungall provides a casebook of 16 excellent examples of the full range of experience of worker owned firms. Three of those cases are viable WTOs. Quarter and Melnyk provide both detailed cases and large scale strategies.

NOTES

Ralph Nader gave to the attempt to save a firm by the device of worker ownership the name of “lemon socialism” and yet worker take overs of failing or closing firms have been a significant factor in the increase of “worker controlled” firms amongst those that were merely workerowned, during the last 20 years.

1. Jones (1984) clarifies that some worker owned firms are amongst the oldest in their industrial sector.

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Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement*. Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State. London: MacMillan Press Ltd. (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto), 1990.

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This rather compact but theoretically dense work is presented by a disabled sociologist, critical of the failure of social theorists to take disability seriously. His intent is to counter the currently oppressive dominance of medicine and psychology in the field by producing a social theory which better accords with the experience of disability, and which might inform strategy among disabled people themselves.

The central proposition is that disability is a social construction mounted on personal tragedy theory rather than a "natural" consequence of an impairment; and that the causation of disability resides not in the functional limitations of individuals, but in the conventional modes of social organization which marginalize people who have impairments. Disability as a category, the author argues, is a Capitalist creation, serving as an effective mechanism of control by establishing the boundary between the work-based and the needs-based systems of allocation. Its control function is sustained by the sheer embeddedness of the core ideology of Individualism, and the peripheral ideologies of medicalization and "normality" in the interlocking structures which define experience and mould consciousness from cradle to grave. Despite differences in the way Capitalism has developed in particular societies, there is an underlying logic which creates and perpetuates disability as an individualized and medicalized problem. The greatest leverage for change lies in the potential of the emergent disability movement, as part of the new social movements, to mount counter-hegemonic politics.

The analysis begins with a focus on the importance of socially ascribed meanings in orienting human behaviour. In this context a critical scrutiny