

Neoliberal Moralism vis-à-vis a Moral Economy: Two Competing Visions of a European Future

Presentation by Damian Gerber (through Skype)

“The fact is that our present market economy is grossly immoral. Even in denying that economics can be regarded as an authentically moral domain in which people always make decisions about who shall do what, what shall be distributed to whom, and how ‘scarce resources’ shall be weighed against ‘unlimited needs,’ the economists have literally ‘demoralized’ us and turned us into moral cretins. Price formation, to take only one example, is not merely an impersonal ‘amoral’ computation of supply versus demand. It is an insidious manipulation of both supply and demand—an immoral manipulation of human needs as part of an immoral pursuit of gain. In speaking of a ‘market economy’ as distinguished from a ‘moral economy,’ it would not be false to speak of an ‘immoral economy’ as distinguished from a ‘moral economy.’”

(Murray Bookchin (1986), ‘Market Economy or Moral Economy?’ in *The Modern Crisis*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, p. 79)

Abstract:

This paper canvasses two alternative visions of a European future by way of Murray Bookchin’s (1986) fertile juxtaposition of a late capitalist/neoliberal market economy to the social and ecological possibilities of a “moral economy.” A vital wellspring of the recent Kurdish revolution, pregnant in Bookchin’s and Abdullah Öcalan’s thought, resides in the conscious embedding of social relations within a nurturing ethical community, a community that subverts the traditional bourgeois antagonism of buyer and seller and its predatory, punitive vision of the social totality.

By contrast, the social logic of neoliberalism—which fractures society into a minority elite and a manipulated mass public—is increasingly premised on a hegemonic, neo-Victorian moralism that blames the victims—be they Greeks, Southern Europeans, or other dispossessed ethnic groups—for their allegedly profligate character. That the social and economic policies of the so-called European Union are ultimately decided by a small roundtable of technocrats is casually obscured by a compliant mass media willing to employ the most specious doctrines of collective responsibility and to create a divisive spectacle of sadomasochism in which the scapegoats, like the Jews in fascist propaganda, can never suffer enough.

Such punitive loathing of the Greeks, skillfully cultivated by northern European elites, disguises a fundamental reality of 21st century Europe: the absence of any ethical control over economic life. We know, too, that this absence is of great significance to the unfolding global ecological crisis. This is precisely why an ecological society, or democratic civilisation, begins and ends with bringing “the economy” under the ethical control of an ecologically supportive, rational, and democratic constellation of municipal communities. Such veritably democratic opposition to neoliberal austerity, this paper contends, has begun to show us several glimpses of such an alternative future in Europe. Its greatest challenge perhaps now lies in overcoming the colonisation of anti-austerity movements by opportunistic reformists and parliamentary parties, as opposed to the political leadership that an emergent revolutionary movement could bring to the fold.

Brief author biography:

Damian Gerber has recently completed his PhD at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. His dissertation was entitled: "The Reification of Nature and its Discontents: A Contribution to the Political Philosophy of Social Ecology." Currently based in Melbourne, Gerber is currently working on a critical re-evaluation of Freudian metapsychology that draws on social ecology, as well as numerous smaller projects.