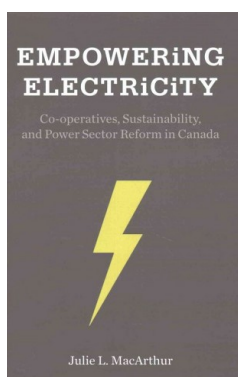


Book Review

By Mumtaz Derya Tarhan



Empowering Electricity: Co-operatives, Sustainability, and Power Sector Reform in Canada.
By Julie L. MacArthur. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016. 259 pp. ISBN 9780774831444.

Electricity is an essential part of everyday life in Canada; therefore, access to and control over it is a significant determinant of our well-being. In this very timely book, Julie MacArthur assesses electricity co-operatives' current influence, and their future potential in democratizing ownership and control in an increasingly corporate-dominated sector.

MacArthur starts the book off with the argument that ecosystem breakdown is in a mutually reinforcing relationship with democratic disempowerment and an economic system based on limitless growth. Together, these three threats to human and ecological well-being form what she calls the “triple crisis” (p. 5). She situates neoliberal governance at the core of this crisis for placing ever-increasing decision-making power in the hands of private corporations, which prioritize the economic bottom-line over human well-being and ecological sustainability. Situating the solution where the problem lies, MacArthur argues for the replacement of neoliberal governance by what she calls empowered participatory governance (EPG). Under the EPG framework, participatory and democratic institutions, including electricity co-operatives, are assigned by MacArthur a strong potential for building “countervailing power” in resisting neoliberal governance and furthering “progressive goals within broader structures of powerlessness and lack of democracy” (p. 40). In the first three chapters, MacArthur aptly reminds readers that electricity co-ops are not a panacea to the so-called “triple crisis,” but instead must consciously build alliances and capacity, both at the organizational and societal levels, to simultaneously counter neoliberal governance and pave the way toward a democratized electricity sector.

In the following chapters, MacArthur applies her governance-based framework to assess power sector reform and restructuring under neoliberalism, first as a general trend (Chapter 4) and then in the specific context of Canada (Chapter 5). For her, neoliberal governance in Canada's electricity sector manifests itself in three main ways: 1) the deregulation of electricity generation and distribution at the local, provincial, and national levels, 2) increased private ownership in electricity generation and distribution, and 3) the continental integration of Canada's provincial power grids. This integrated landscape, as also recently argued by J.J. McMurtry (2017), allows for heightened competition between Canada's provinces for access to bigger and more lucrative U.S. electricity markets, while often overlooking the needs and well-being of their own inhabitants. Furthermore, the increased economic power of private corporations allows for the expansion of their influence on public policy and thereby sets a further barrier to community-owned and controlled initiatives, such as electricity co-ops (MacArthur, 2016). It is as a response to this neoliberal context of democratic disempowerment, MacArthur argues, that electricity co-operatives in Canada are increasing their presence.

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MacArthur subsequently moves to an analysis of electricity co-operatives' current activity across Canada, which is taking place in four main areas: generation, distribution, consumer, and networking. Today, she points out, co-operatives that generate electricity from renewable energy (renewable energy co-operatives or RE co-ops for short) account for almost 80 percent of all active electricity co-ops across Canada. MacArthur subsequently demonstrates that this rise in the number of RE co-ops is closely linked to supportive policies, such as Nova Scotia's Community Feed-in Tariff (COMFIT) and Ontario's Feed-in Tariff (FIT) program, which provides a set-aside capacity for RE co-ops. In her attempt to identify the factors behind the emergence of such supportive policies, she studies the impact the WindShare Co-operative and the ensuing movement-building around community energy (CE) had on the introduction of Ontario's program. Thereby, MacArthur eloquently reveals the mutually reinforcing relationship between political mobilization and policy development, underlining the importance of network- and association-building for electricity co-ops in growing their "countervailing power" for public policy intervention.

Although this increase in co-op activity is encouraging and reveals a resistance against the "triple crisis" linked to neoliberal capitalism, MacArthur reminds us that electricity co-ops continue to play a marginal role in electricity generation and distribution across Canada. She associates this with broader neoliberal governance structures that place co-operatives at a disadvantage to corporate entities in accessing financing, paid staff, procurement contracts, and project sites. Consequently, MacArthur argues, electricity co-ops in Canada often find themselves having to partner with corporate/government actors, compromising on their control of and benefits from the project, and thereby undermining their potential for furthering the EPG agenda. Again, for MacArthur, the solution lies in countering neoliberal governance through demanding public policy that prioritizes democratic and participatory organizations' further involvement in the electricity sector.

In the final chapter, MacArthur concludes that electricity co-ops in Canada successfully contribute to the democratization of electricity governance by expanding the local ownership of electricity assets, engaging members in participatory decision-making processes, and building a movement for policy change. To her disappointment, MacArthur's interviews do not reveal any explicit demand for systemic change, which she argues is a significant limitation to electricity co-ops' transformative potential and "countervailing power" (p. 194). She finishes the book by suggesting the establishment of strategic links between electricity co-ops and social movements advocating for broader systemic change.

Overall, MacArthur does an excellent job of highlighting how deeply electricity co-ops are embedded in broader governance structures, which helps her recognize their limitations under the current dominant social relations while also underscoring their transformative potential. Her call for coalition-building between co-ops and other social movements to resist and replace neoliberal governance is timely and builds on an understanding of electricity co-ops in Canada based on historical political economy. That being said, MacArthur's assessment of electricity co-ops' potential in contributing to a post-capitalist society does fall short and hence could have benefited from two additional inquiries: first, MacArthur could have investigated the *implicit* ideational and practical impacts engagement in a co-op has on its members. These impacts are the subject of an increasing number of studies in the field of social movement learning (Hall, 2009; Holst, 2002; Kilgore, 1999; Krinsky & Barket, 2009; Larraburre, Vieta, & Schugurensky, 2011) and are useful in investigating co-ops' potential in contributing to an alternative society. Second, in her interviews, MacArthur could have delved into the evolution of electricity co-ops' missions and activities as a result of interactions with governmental institutions and other co-ops and social movements. These interactions trigger organizational learning processes that often result in the co-optation or radicalization of co-ops (Baviskar, 2005; Nilsen, 2010; Scandrett, Crowther, Hemmi, Mukherjee, Shah, & Sen, 2010; Scandrett & Mukherjee, 2011) and can significantly alter their "countervailing power." Notwithstanding these oversights, MacArthur's pioneering book on electricity co-operatives is a valuable contribution to both energy policy and co-operative enterprise literatures, while having significant strategic implications for co-ops on the ground.

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