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Book Review

by Elizabeth Russell & Jenna Hawkins

The Social Economy: Working Alternatives in a Globalizing Era. By *Hasmet M. Uluorta*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009. 256 pp. ISBN 9780415775939

Motivated by what he identifies as a “global crisis of reproduction,” Hasmet M. Uluorta explores the emerging role of the social economy in the paradigmatic shift from that of “employment” to that of “work”; a shift which has produced changes in what kinds of labour workers expend and how their labour power is understood. Having become increasingly precarious in the market-driven economy, the conception of labour has changed from rational to reflexive. This shift is demonstrated in a change in workers’ employment motives from purely financially-driven ones toward increasingly socially-conscious motivations, involving both paid and non-paid labour. The growth of the social economy and a changing understanding of labour are the book’s central themes: the transition from paid employment-derived identity to an emerging consciousness of *being-in-the-world-with-others* (discussed further below). Uluorta develops a theoretical framework for conceptualizing these changes, drawing from Marxist philosophical traditions and testing against an original empirical study.

Uluorta ultimately suggests that the gradual withdrawal of the state from social programs since the 1970s, in conjunction with the rise of precarious employment as a normative yet disadvantaged status, has prompted both the need for, and desire of, workers to engage in labour differently. Specifically, workers are now seeking out opportunities to use their labour in a more socially meaningful way. This argument is strengthened by an exhaustive quantitative study in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, that demonstrates substantial growth of the social economy. Uluorta outlines three primary aims for this book: providing practical insights to encourage further implementation of alternative working practices; providing an innovative theoretical and empirical framework to analyze this paradigm shift; and providing a useful reference point for future research.

Much of the book is spent tracking the paradigmatic shift from “employment” to “work,” its historical trajectory and the role of the social economy. The (post-War, Fordist) employment paradigm, spanning from the 1940s to the 1970s, is characterized by two features: (1) the market-driven economy; and (2) government commitment to full employment, both of which featured the domination of Taylorist factory and assembly line labour by a primarily male workforce. This produced what Uluorta calls “rational” employment. As the paid labour market and state sectors underwent major changes in the 1970s, a movement away from “employment” and toward “work” was spurred. Uluorta suggests that this movement consists of an intersection of social, economic, and political changes – namely, global economic restructuring toward a service and knowledge-based economy, the mass entry of women into paid labour, the expansion of working hours, employer demands for an increasingly flexible workforce, and the shift away from welfare state principles –

which produced an economy and a workforce very different from that of the previous “employment” paradigm. He notes that this shift has resulted in workers requiring extra support and assistance (such as that offered by social economy organizations), and seeking more meaningful and reflexive labour experiences.

The theories and ideas presented in the book are important both scholarly and practically. Uluorta illustrates the value of non-paid work in a predominantly market economy through a unique and comprehensive theory of “economy” and economic activity, ideas that have been similarly approached in feminist literature (see, for example, Waring, 1999). Uluorta comprehensively develops his key concepts throughout the book, weaving together ideas of “employment,” “work,” and *being-in-the-world-with-others*, conceptualizations that guide the reader through the history of – and meaning behind – labour in our globalizing era.

The new experience of labour in the “work” paradigm is characterized by multi-activity, as workers engage in both paid and non-paid labour. Uluorta notes that, of course, workers continue to participate in paid employment, but now consider that non-paid social economy work carries equal importance. Although financial stability is essential, workers increasingly value “a sense of community, responsibility, solidarity, hope, care and dependence” (p. 8). As Uluorta argues, the social economy is expanding as workers seek opportunities to support this new consciousness of *being-in-the-world-with-others*. The growth of the social economy signals the paradigmatic shift toward “work.”

The author’s thesis – the increasingly important role of the social economy in contributing to the emerging consciousness of *being-in-the-world-with-others* and therefore in addressing the global crisis of reproduction – is expertly developed, both theoretically and empirically, throughout the book. His theoretical framework is tested against survey data collected from organizations and workers in the social economy in Toronto, which provides evidence of the growth of the sector in the early 2000s, and of an increasingly reflexive workforce whose understanding of their labour is changing.

The central ideas in this text are wide-reaching in significance, and are therefore relevant to academics in a variety of disciplines. However, the author’s writing style is not easily accessible to practitioners and students who lack a philosophical or economic background, given the complicated scholarly underpinnings of the theory. The jargon and complex philosophical references may add value to the text for some, but will likely alienate most readers, thereby undermining practical application of content for many social economy practitioners, students, and even academics.

For example, the survey items are thought-provoking and would be interesting to practitioners and researchers, but the results are analyzed and interpreted in a manner far removed from the participants’ lived experience of labour in the social economy. Inclusion of a qualitative data component, to illustrate participants’ experiences of labour, would contextualize and strengthen the impact of Uluorta’s argument of a changing understanding of labour, work and economy. We do, however, acknowledge that this book represents an ambitious and unique project, and has the potential to spur future and more accessible research in this area.

By providing a comprehensive historical and theoretical overview of the social economy in the global context, Uluorta achieves two out of his three aims. Unfortunately, the theory and results presented in the book cannot be easily applied to the study of labour in the social economy. Still, Uluorta successfully provides an innovative theoretical and empirical framework for examining the paradigmatic shift from “employment” to “work,” and encourages future research in this area by other social economy researchers.

Reference

Waring, M. (1999). *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

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