
When Karl Marx wrote in 1848 about the ‘heavy artillery... [which] batters down all Chinese walls’ he was of course referring to the implications of the bourgeois epoch, with its birth of a world market and its attempt, ‘to create a world after its own image’ (The Communist Manifesto). Marx’s nemeses, the political economists (or in today’s language, neo-liberals), felt very differently about the impact of capitalism upon the world. A century and half later these same concerns continue to arouse debate. The representatives of multilateral institutions and transnational corporations (TNCs) enthusiastically promote the late 20th Century form of the world market: the globalization process. Increased trade and integration, the neo-liberals argue, will inevitably lead towards gains in material wealth and economic prosperity. A broad array of concerned unions, religious institutions, environmental organizations and select national governments are skeptical about the supposed advantages of this process. Joshua Karliner’s The Corporate Planet fits into this latter grouping, representing a sustained critique of what he calls ‘global corporatisation’, which can be understood as ‘the ascendancy of the global corporate imperative over that of national interests’ (pp. 4, 13).

Through a series of case studies, Karliner traces the rise of TNCs (chapter one) and their increasing power to make decisions of extraordinary scope irrespective of the wishes of nation-states and local communities. Chapter two studies the phenomenon of corporate environmentalism. Chapters three and four deal with the US oil conglomerate Chevron and the Japanese sogoshosa Mitsubishi, respectively. Chapter five examines the World Bank and its role in encouraging the movement of hazardous industries to low-cost environments, part of the process known as the ‘race to the bottom’ where competing states offer ever-greater incentives (with ever greater social costs) to encourage foreign investment. Chapter six details the consequences of cultural globalization where 80% of the world’s population has access to a television, yet only 20% actually has access to a cash economy which allows participation in the events and products advertised. Finally, chapter seven explores the less powerful, but growing, opposition to globalization and the activist groups attempting to turn the tide.

This is a very detailed and accessible examination of the impacts of globalization and it is easily recommendable to a broad audience beyond the confines of academia. The case studies are strong and well researched. The book is a useful contribution to the debate over globalization and provides ample evidence of the negative consequences, the maldistribution of benefits and the inherently unjust nature of contemporary structures within the world economy. Given this, I am reticent to highlight two reservations I have of the book, but nevertheless these hint at the potential weakness of some strategies employed in the fight to redress the current social and ecological imbalances.
In examining corporate environmentalism, Karliner tends to endorse the perspective known as ‘greenwashing’ which occurs when TNCs acknowledge environmental problems, but in reality only treat symptoms rather than invest in prevention (p. 37). Karliner points to the ways in which corporations and TNCs have had to be forced into making concessions through popular protests and he quite rightly highlights the circumstances by which US corporations in the 1970s undermined pollution controls by forcing through ‘end-of-the-pipe’ regulations as against mandated changes to production processes (pp. 31–36). Karliner acknowledges that there have been some promising attempts at corporate greening, though these are seen as too marginal, given the strength of TNCs. Yet, his examination of these processes of ‘semi-legitimate’ corporate environmentalism is not very nuanced and relies principally on one source: the Business Council for Sustainable Development’s Changing Course. The debate around this issue is perhaps a little more complex than given credit; for instance, how should we regard the decision by all the leading British supermarkets not to stock genetically-modified foods? The point here is that large, multinational companies are making a decision (primarily profit-driven) that is environmentally and socially beneficial to a whole series of groups along the food chain. It is, of course, not beneficial to the likes of Monsanto and the US government, among others. In this case we can see that TNCs do not necessarily share interests, but often compete in manner which can literally destroy each other’s profit base. This leads to my second reservation with the book.

Karliner’s tendency to endorse the local and communitarian as against the global and international poses contradictions. He recognizes that many neofascist and chauvinist groups, such as France’s Front National and India’s Hindu-nationalist BJP, share much rhetoric with progressive groups fighting economic globalization (p. 216). However, the endorsement of local communities possessing inherently ‘spiritual and tangible connection[s] with the earth and her resources’ (p. 218) is no less of a myth-making exercise than that of reactionaries who speak in the mindless fashion of defending ties to ‘homelands’. Moreover, the kinds of alternatives Karliner offers are a hodge-podge of progressive and conservative hopes: ecologically-oriented market economies, small-businesses, municipal corporations, ‘dedicated’ banks and ‘greater equity between North and South’ (p. 218). Karliner does recognize the need to create much greater levels of democracy and accountability at local, national and global levels, but it is incremental changes to institutions at the various levels which is endorsed, rather than a root and branch transformation. Importantly, there is the recognition for a necessary redistribution of the world’s resources, but Karliner sees the mechanism for doing this as an international tax (p. 221).

These criticisms of Karliner’s work should not detract from its overall scope, nor the important case studies it highlights; but, by offering a radical critique with liberal solutions there is a slight sense of incompleteness to the work. I will admit to being overly optimistic, but surely the consequences of capitalism necessitate a global association of humans ‘in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.’

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When asked to review this book, I decided to use it to prepare my Presidential Address to ANZSEE’s 1999 Conference. The theme for that conference was ‘Grounding the Paradigm’. Ecological Economics is searching for a new perspective, a new paradigm. The book is by a ‘Who’s