

Matthew Brown and Rhian E. Jones, *Paint Your Town Red: How Preston Took Back Control and Your Town Can Too*, London: Repeater Books, 2021. ISBN: 9781913462192 (paper); ISBN: 9781913462222 (ebook)

Paint Your Town Red begins with a bang. In clear and persuasive prose, Matthew Brown and Rhian E. Jones deftly dissect the contemporary conjuncture—what they call, quite simply, “the mess we’re in”—that is, the coming together of multiple troubling trends and crisis-tendencies from debt-driven financialisation of an economy increasingly dependent on unsustainable asset price inflation, extractive rents and exploitative precarious gig work to the rise of reactionary neo-fascisms and the electoral failure of progressive populism (Corbyn and Sanders) to find a solution to a “mess that no one in charge has seemed willing or able to clean up” (p.6). The book’s opening gambit, then, is to ask who or what can possibly clean up this mess.

The answer resides in the movements for “participatory democratic socialism” (p.23) that had begun to cohere around the transatlantic Corbyn–McDonnell and Sanders projects and whose local expression is community wealth building (CWB). This is a progressive policy project for building, as it says on the tin, community wealth—understood as social value and collective wellbeing, as well as material resources—through various institutional innovations and policy reforms, largely at the municipal scale, which enable the capturing of value locally for its democratic distribution for meeting social need, rather than allowing it to be siphoned off for private profit.

Just like the movement for which it sketches a portrait, *Paint Your Town Red* is an ambitious book of diverse aspirations, purposes and uses: part socioeconomic diagnosis; part historical record; part political manifesto; part how-to guide; part compendium of alternatives. As diagnosis, it succinctly skewers how neoliberal capitalism, urban entrepreneurialism and austerity localism have devastated large swathes of the Global North, in particular the UK (its primary geographical focus) and especially peripheral post-industrial areas disconnected from the urban growth hubs benefiting from policies focused on

agglomeration, innovation and the creative class. The book is especially sharp in locating where it all went wrong—not least in successive Conservative and New Labour governments’ “shallow attempts to ‘regenerate’ post-industrial areas through short-term projects of inward investment, but ... [making] no structural changes to the ownership of the economy” (p.46). Herein lies CWB’s radical potential—of making “structural changes to the ownership of the economy”; of “really taking back control”, as pointedly rendered in one of the early chapters, subverting the reactionary right’s Brexit campaign slogan.

It was this diagnosis of the futility of state-led regeneration programmes following their demise in the post-2010 era of austerity that inspired the Manchester-based think-and-do tank the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES)—the key catalysing agent of CWB in the UK—to rethink public procurement budgets as alternative pots of regeneration funding that could be wielded more autonomously and creatively by municipalities (CLES 2017). Knowsley in the Liverpool City Region, just down the road from Preston, was one of the first localities that CLES advised to use procurement in this innovative way (Thompson et al. 2020). When coupled with the US-based Democracy Collaborative’s Cleveland model of using the “influenceable spend” of anchor institutions—large place-based organisations with a civic mission, such as universities, hospitals and housing associations—in similar ways, but specifically to direct contracts to worker-owned cooperatives and thereby incubate a democratic local economy, this CLES strategy for autonomous economic revitalisation morphed into what became known as the Preston model, when John McDonnell, then Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, coined the term in a press conference in the city (Thompson 2021).

Democratic control of the economy is to be achieved through a number of diverse interventions in different domains and across scales—yet focusing very much on the local. Worker-owned cooperatives, community land trusts, participatory budgeting, progressive procurement, social and community enterprise, peoples’ banks, credit unions, municipal insourcing, living wage regulations—all these approaches and initiatives are briefly discussed in the book, in short dedicated sections, as parts of the puzzle of piecing together greater

democratic control over local economies. Yet the rationale and backstory for how the Democracy Collaborative formulated their CWB strategy—designed specifically for bringing all these disparate initiatives together into an integrated multi-scalar system for economic democracy supported by anchor institutional supply chains, progressive municipal interventions in land and finance, and even welfare state reforms such as for a Universal Basic Income—is never really explored in the book.

I'm not sure that the localist vision painted by Brown and Jones—described variously as “democratic localism”, “universalisable localism”, “inclusive localism”, or “guerrilla localism”—quite matches up to the holistic multi-scalar strategy for full-system change envisioned by the originators of the CWB concept. There's a risk in leaning too heavily on the localist elements of the model—rather than the municipalist or state transformation strategies—that it falls into the “local trap” (Russell 2019) and fails to challenge the wider structural processes and systemic dynamics of capital accumulation and colonial extraction that condition and constrain the kind of “small-scale alternatives” at which Sharzer (2012) levelled his *No Local* critique.

Moreover, I was left wondering what it is about these democratic localist interventions that marks them out as distinctively CWB as opposed to initiatives associated with older or more established movements, from the commons and cooperativism to transformative social innovation and the social and solidarity economy. The foundational economy is one such field of praxis that's given a fair bit of attention as a “related but slightly differently focused set of ideas” (p.94) but whose conceptual connections, complementarities and contradictions with CWB are left for the reader to find elsewhere (see Russell et al. 2022; Thompson et al. 2020).

The Preston model is the hook for the book; Part Two, of three main parts, tells the inside story, from genesis to ongoing evolution. Its first author, the Labour–Cooperative Party politician Matthew Brown is of course the leader of Preston City Council, having been elected to that position arguably following the success of the Preston model. Its second author, Rhian E. Jones, is a music journalist and cultural critic who has clearly held the pen

here. Notwithstanding Rhian's writing talents, *Paint Your Town Red* lacks an authorial voice—particularly Matthew's, who is often rather bizarrely introduced or quoted in the text impersonally and whose personal history and skin in the game of the Preston model is submerged beneath a dispassionate account that could do with some of the drama of political memoir and biography. This is a missed opportunity, I feel, to grab the reader's attention, to get us to really care about what's at stake. There was no doubt a real political battle fought, on multiple fronts, in winning round all the stakeholders to the Preston model—one that is still ongoing—but that story isn't told.

In making the bipartisan case for the Preston model, this choice of style is understandable; for the model to catch on, it needs to be palatable across the political spectrum. Allowing for political pluralism is both a major strength and weakness of the model—and a difficult tension running right through the book. While painting your town *red* is an undeniably socialist or communist gesture, Matthew Brown is often cited as suggesting that the Preston model is just “extreme common sense” (p.65) implying an apolitical pragmatism. The deeply pragmatic proposals for progressive procurement, civic participation and living wage employment don't quite do justice to the roll call of revolutionary antecedents in the second chapter titled “A Brief History of Democratic Localism”—from the 1871 Paris Commune to 1930s Spanish anarchism and 1950s Yugoslav council communism; from the Zapatista autonomous polity in Chiapas to the libertarian municipalist confederation in Rojava, Syria; from Peter Kropotkin to Murray Bookchin. Strangely, the radical history of Preston itself—with working-class traditions in guild cooperativism and labour organising that prompted Karl Marx, on a trip to Preston in the 1850s, to describe the city as the “next Saint Petersburg”, in reference to the Decembrist revolt of the 1820s (cited in Lockey and Glover 2019), is passed over without remark.

How does this radical rendering square with Brown's challenge of winning the support of the Conservative-run Lancashire County Council—a key governmental stakeholder and anchor institution in the Preston model with arguably more public powers than Preston City Council? Moreover, how well do these political claims sit next to the

book's practical concerns to gain "buy in" (p.38) from sceptical citizens and gatekeepers? Or indeed to see the Preston model replicated in other places, with less favourable political and institutional conditions perhaps, for a "universalisable localism", an "adaptable and elastic model which needs careful attention to local circumstances" (p.127)? The Preston model is clearly a reformist accommodation, rather than radical break, with the status quo, which places it firmly in the tradition of "progressive localism" (Featherstone et al. 2012) or "progressive urbanism" (Beveridge and Naumann 2021; Mason and Whitehead 2012) but the book's lack of theorisation of a theory of change or strategic approach to system transformation, in the vein of Erik Olin Wright's (2010) real utopias project, for instance—notwithstanding a few nods to "real utopias"—obfuscates significant distinctions between radicalism and progressivism.

On the flipside, the book thus benefits from carrying its narrative lightly without the verbal baggage of critical geography, policy wonkery or activist discourse, in concise and straightforward terms, aimed primarily at a non-academic audience. Although the book lacks academic references or an index, or indeed substantive theoretical engagement, policy analysis, historical exploration or ethnographic detail, it contains a wealth of helpful information on, for instance, how councils are structured in the UK, and a range of useful resources and contacts of think tanks, cooperative organisers and policy networks, as well as practical "how-to guides" on community and political activism—everything from how to start a community land trust to how to raise an issue with your councillor or stand for election yourself.

Published by Repeater—the radical publishing imprint established by the original founders of Zer0 Books, including Mark Fisher, and whose mission, as stated inside every back cover, is to "...add its voice to those movements that wish to enter history and assert control over its currents, gathering together scattered and isolated voices with those who have already called for an escape from Capitalist Realism"—*Paint Your Town Red* is very much an heir to the legacy of Mark Fisher's (2009) *Capitalist Realism*, the book that captured the imaginations and radicalised a generation of young people who would go on to form the core

of Corbyn's support base, as *Generation Left* (Milburn 2019). In referencing a number of related Repeater titles—from Joy White's (2020) *Terraformed* to Alex Niven's (2019) *New Model Island*, whose democratic-devolutionary vision for "radical regionalism" informs the "democratic localism" proffered here—*Paint Your Town Red* can be read as the latest hit in a Zer0–Repeater blockbuster series stretching from Greg Sharzer's (2012) *No Local* (a classic critique of localism that deserves more attention) and Steve Hanson's (2014) *Small Towns, Austere Times* to Grace Blakeley's (2019) *Stolen* and Owen Hatherley's (2020) *Red Metropolis*. Largely absent from *Paint Your Town Red*, however, is some of the creative conceptual synthesis and criticality that distinguishes the Zer0–Repeater brand.

My best guess of its target audience are those ardent readers and fellow travellers of Zer0–Repeater who aligned themselves with the Corbyn–McDonnell project and who, in the aftermath of the defeat of British left populism in December 2019, are left wondering what to do with their political hopes and energies. There now seems to be a sense amongst the embryonic networks of municipalists in the UK that the failure of participatory democratic socialism at the national level was a pivotal turning point that has since catalysed action at the municipal scale and thrown limelight on place-based alternatives to neoliberalism, not least the Preston model—described by *The Economist* as "Jeremy Corbyn's model town" and a "laboratory of Corbynomics" (see Thompson 2021). Indeed, the glow cast by the limelight on Preston has attracted high-profile reviews of *Paint Your Town Red* in the national press (see Hanley 2021; Moore 2021).

While many reviews are glowing, excited by the book's call to arms, several have been especially critical of the lack of evidence or arguments provided in support of the model's efficacy. Writing in *Stir to Action*, Gregory (2021) remarks on the "missed opportunity to rebuff the protectionist critique"; while in *The Guardian*, Moore (2021) suggests that "[i]f the Preston model works, it will stand up to more robust examination than *Paint Your Town Red* offers ... [T]he Preston model will have to go into battle with better weapons than this book provides". Alongside addressing concerns over the self-defeating protectionism of localised supply chain strategies producing a zero-sum race to the bottom

amongst “progressive” municipalities—an inversion of neoliberal inter-urban competition—another major challenge ahead, and more explicitly recognised in the book, is building public awareness of and community engagement in the model. Yet the evidence presented to support claims that “awareness is growing” is simply the “sense of local ‘place-based pride’ which the changes are producing” (p.67) apparently reported to the authors in interview with Julian Manley, a local academic and one of the architects of the Preston model. A related shortcoming, then, is the lack of detail or transparency on the research methodology, which seems to be based on a handful of interviews with key players. Several questionable points are “supported by our research for this book” (p.40) without reference to what that entailed.

In the field more broadly, there is a dearth of serious policy analysis or theoretical engagement with the Preston model’s central claims in localising wealth, regenerating place, generating democratic engagement and improving socioeconomic conditions, save for an edited collection written by some of its main advocates (Manley and Whyman 2021), a philosophical defence of CWB by two of its more prominent theorists (Guinan and O’Neill 2019), and a broadly sympathetic assessment of the Preston model’s impact (Lockey and Glover 2019) by the think tank responsible for recognising Preston as the “most improved” city in the UK in the 2018 Good Growth for Cities report, co-produced by Demos and PwC, and often held up as evidence of the model’s positive effects. Beyond the hype, a sober analysis of the model and its mechanisms in respect of financial flows, capital ownership, regional supply chains, foundational infrastructures and social reproduction needs to be written.

It’s in this missed opportunity that I get the sense the book seeks to showcase a progressive policy *brand*—echoing others (Gregory 2021)—rather than engage in difficult debates on building real utopias (Wright 2010). Conspicuously absent is the emerging field and global movement of municipalism, except in passing to note the “pioneering municipalist movement in Barcelona ... [defining] its participants as ‘citizens’, meaning those who lived in the city and therefore had a stake in its fortunes, regardless of their actual nationality or legal citizenship status” (p.32). This is an important point that seems just as relevant for

CWB as it does for municipalism and also seems essential to Brown and Jones' argument for a progressive or "universalisable" localism that "challenges the idea that 'taking back control' ... is dependent upon reactionary measures of xenophobia, racism, authoritarianism and centralisation" (p.34).

"Going beyond municipalism", they write, "also offers the chance to include rural and suburban areas and isolated communities beyond major towns and cities" (p.32). This sets up the book's most valuable contribution: countering CWB's bias for large cities and their inbuilt advantages of civic assets such as anchor institutions and their distinctly *urban* "politics of proximity" (Russell 2019); potentially transcending municipalism's dependency on centrality, proximity and agglomeration. Many of the case studies offered up as exemplars are of grassroots projects in post-industrial rural communities or small towns, mostly in Wales—reflecting Jones' Welsh heritage but also both authors' ambition to bridge the gap, increasingly evident in municipalist praxis and critical urban studies more generally (Beveridge and Naumann 2021), between metropolitan centres and smaller, less "urban" settlements. The subtitle of the book expresses this refocus on towns over cities: *How Preston Took Back Control and Your Town Can Too*.

From the outset, Brown and Jones are clear that while Preston is often described by critics as the "Goldilocks" of CWB—"just right" for experimentation, a transport hub blessed with so many anchor institutions—they are adamant that other places "will be able to identify their own place-based large employers who can act as anchor institutions" or, alternatively, "may choose another route that bypasses procurement issues and concentrates on building local means of wealth generation, community ownership and management of local resources" (p.29). If CWB is to spill out beyond the boundaries of the city and into rural and suburban hinterlands, beyond its current constituency amongst progressive politicians, policy activists and community development consultants to find traction with wider publics, then *Paint Your Town Red* is the handbook for making it happen.

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