

MUSINGS FROM THE TRENCHES

INTRODUCTION

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Want, exclusion, hard times, market failure, poverty, degradation of our environment – many factors lead individuals, community groups and organizations and businesses to take action aimed at improving the daily round of life. People organize to resist destructive forces damaging to the common good. People also organize to creatively engage in building alternatives. This volume is mainly about the latter.

This is not to suggest resistance is not necessary at time; not many of the writers you are going to meet in this fascinating collection would suggest otherwise. Indeed, the hard work of building alternatives is often born from the crucible of resistance to the status quo.

The wide ranging articles in this volume engage us in the critical reflections and learning of individuals, groups, organizations, enterprises and institutions that are in the trenches, actors and researchers who believe action to build more resilient communities and societies is vital to our collective future. In the midst of much uncertainty, often against great odds, their undertakings are akin to work on a construction site; their focus – fostering social and economic innovation. Day by day they engage and commit themselves to making a positive difference those places and spaces within our society where social and economic circumstances are tough.

Beyond the description, analysis and lessons depicted in these pages, one will find plenty of probing for policy implications and attempts to apply research findings to scaling up what seems to be working. While the emphasis is on the practice, there are stimulating forays into the theoretical underpinnings of the community economic development and the social economy across North America.

One theoretical perspective inherently critiqued by this volume are the central tenants of neo-liberal theory; that only the market determines what is of value, that only the market efficiently allocates resources to their highest and best use, and, that so long as the operations of the market, the movement of capital and the conduct of trade are free from social or other restrictions, the public good will be served.

Given the articles and papers herein feature innovations and practices born out market failure, out of the disinterest of conventional markets in unmet social and economic need and even their out-right antagonism to social and environmental goals being seen as integral to our economic life, it is unlikely this collection will be popular among true believers in neo-liberal ideology.

However, an anti-market bias will **not** be found in these pages. Markets are human constructions and have been around since the first barter exchanges, likely before human speech. Markets are critically important to the production and distribution of goods and services. They are also heavily influenced by the values and assumptions we as human beings bring them. For most of human history social relations governed the operation of markets and reciprocity was a central feature of their operations. However, in less than 300 years conservative economic thinkers have cast aside the idea that social relations or goals should have any part to play in economic life or the operation of markets. Rather, the pursuit of individual self-interest and profit is the central driver; through every person pursuing their own self-interest, the invisible hand of the market will lead to the best outcomes.

In contrast the contributors to this book assert social goals must have a place in our economic life, although the astute reader will detect considerable variation in emphasis. Some writers see

the work of re-introducing social goals into the economic or business equation as a corrective to the excesses and blind spots of a less than perfect market. Some are merely pragmatic; when confronted with the realities of impoverishment one just does what works. Leveraging and mobilizing social relations is fundamental to getting things done in tough situations. Others start from a more expansive premise, that without social equity and environmental sustainability being integrated into both policy and practice, economic viability is a charade. They would argue against a vision bound by what is; rather, they come at their work from the perspective that the values inherent in the social economy must be advanced and thus contended for in every aspect of society, including the market and the state.

Crafted primarily by practitioners, applied researchers, activists and a smattering of academics from across North America, the contributions represent a sample of the work and thinking going on in what some might call the margins. I see this as its strength. It is precisely because the learning and lessons are born within the centre of what is considered marginal that it holds so much relevance for a pugnacious and self-confident “mainstream.” Lessons learned through innovations in tough contexts are valuable, especially when the global challenges we face are becoming more difficult on several fronts – climate change, water quality and accessibility, peak oil, food security. These convergent “wicked” problems are creating new contexts where the local and regional capacity to cogitate, agitate, motivate, activate, innovate and communicate are likely to become ever more important to making the radical adaptations a rapidly changing environment is likely to force.

For students used to reading journals and texts, the emphasis and style of selections found in this volume is decidedly different.

The source of many selections is a quarterly periodical called Making Waves. I am its editor. Founded in the late 80's by the Centre for Community Enterprise and now being published by the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal, Making Waves was because we needed a communication device if we were to contribute to building community economic development networks in Canada, and in more recent year, the social economy movement. We assumed that if a movement is to grow and have impact, critical reflection on what was being learned was fundamental. What is working and what is not, and how we might better connect the dots to scale up those innovations that are getting good results; this experience must be shared. Making Waves has created a space for practitioners and researchers tell their stories and share their lessons.

No doubt my personal history has influenced my decisions to select articles for inclusion in this book.

I did my first community development job in Alert Bay, a tiny island in Johnstone Strait, just off the north end of Vancouver Island. I was 17 years old. At 25 I was doing full time human rights work focused on Bolivia, the result of having been involved tangentially in the first World Council of Indigenous People Conference held in Port Alberni in 1975, the town I still live in. Not being paid for this work, and with our first child on the way, I recruited a couple of friends to start a business with the aim of generating profits to finance the human rights work. In the parlance of today it would be called a social enterprise; profits (beyond a limited bonus) are annually all given away and then reinvested by the non-profit beneficiary (Canadian Centre for Community Renewal). After thirty years and hundreds of projects - experiments, failures and successes- later, the learning that started so intensely at 17 years of age is still going on. I know the same is true for the many colleagues and collaborators across the country and the globe I have the privilege to work with. You will meet several of them within these pages.

The B.C. – Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance: Questions and Themes Shaping this Book

Among the long time investments the Canadian Centre for Community Enterprise and the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal have made is national organizing, research and publications work focused on building a Pan-Canadian network and trying to effect public policy in the field of community economic development and, more recently, the social economy. The Canadian CED network emerged out of this investment and through its member and in partnership with other key networks, like the Chantier l'économie sociale in Quebec and the Canadian Co-operative Association, some *modest* successes have been achieved. Among them was the social economy initiative brought in by Liberal Government under Paul Martin, most of which was cut by the conservative government of Steven Harper.

However, \$13+ of the \$15 million allocated for social economy research managed to survive. In addition to a national hub, six regional nodes were conceived – B.C.-Alberta, the North, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and N.W. Ontario, Southern Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic. The program is for five years. The largest single allocation of their budgets is for student research.

In consultation with several groups and networks in B.C. and Alberta it was decided by the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal (CCCR) to try and organize a proposal that could win the competition put out by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Universities are almost always the lead in CURA's (Community University Research Alliances) of which the Social Economy Suite is a variation.

Well we managed to win the competition, for better or worse - time will tell. The B.C.-Alberta (BALTA) Social Economy Research Alliance is the only regional node led by a practitioner based sector organization. And, for better or worse, I am the so called "lead investigator", a role I had never heard of before and a role I am still trying to understand, especially as it is couched within the mysterious worlds of the academy and the Federal Social Science and Humanities Research Council. For a person who shunned graduate school to find himself in such a predicament has been an object lesson in scrambling up a steep learning curve. I am beginning to understand just how important the infrastructure universities represent are in this kind of undertaking.

On the academic side there are five universities that make up the BALTA node. There are also many practice based organizations, from each province and across the country. There are also some international collaborators from U.S. and Britain. While many of the people engaged on the practice side have worked together before, the relationship between practitioners and the academy in the social economy arena has been very limited in B.C. and Alberta. Building a platform capable of forging a research agenda relevant to strengthening the field in each province was thus a major reason for CCCR to take the initiative to try and launch a bid for the project. For the first time in B.C. and Alberta we have an opportunity to build a platform where practitioners, researchers and scholars can begin to forge a relationship focused on strengthening of the social economy in our little corner of the world.

It is out of this context that the idea for this book emerged. Its immediate goal is to provide a resource to students, researchers and practitioners that become associated with BALTA. By choosing material that bears relevance to the main research questions driving the BALTA agenda I thought the coherence and understanding of the overall project might be advanced. However, the breadth and depth of material represented in this book are relevant well beyond BALTA. Such a collection is not available in English Canada. Indeed, I have not seen such a collection anywhere in North America, except perhaps in Quebec where the accessibility for non-French readers is obviously limited. Thus it represents a unique reader for English speakers, whether students, practitioners, researchers, teachers or policy makers, wherever they might be working in North America.

Seven BALTA research interests have influenced the selection of articles and papers for inclusion.

1. ***Re-inserting social goals into economic life***: to better understand and *critically analyze* the

impact of inserting such social processes of reciprocity, solidarity, and sustainability into economic life, in practice and in theory.

2. Relationship between territorial and enterprise approaches: to better understand and *critically analyze* how territorial (CED) and social enterprise approaches can interact to enhance the overall potency of the social economy.

3. Understand the social economy as it current exists: to better understand and *critically analyze* the social economy as it exists.

4. What is working and why: to understand and *critically analyze* the characteristics of exemplary practice wherever it occurs

5. What supports or thwarts adaptation & scaling up: to understand and *critically analyze* key issues, opportunities, and constraints for adapting and scaling up what is working into the B.C. and Alberta contexts.

6. What are the central public policy and political factors: to identify how key factors play themselves out in debates related to CED and the social economy

7. What might be the future role and relevance of the social economy be: to think about what contribution the social economy might make in a rapidly changing economic, political, social and environmental landscapes.

Another angle that played into article selection are the themes of three research clusters within BALTA. One is set up to probe the relevance and role of **social enterprise in human services and affordable housing**. A second focuses on rural development and sustainability, with a particular focus on the linkages between natural resources, local development, social enterprise. The third casts its net somewhat differently, seeking to better understand the **web of supports necessary to strengthen the social economy** and the tools and means of **tracking progress**.

Lastly, BALTA has an interest in fostering critical reflection on concepts and theory. While not the driving priority in the work of BALTA, the role of theory is considered important; conceptual frameworks shape how we think, what we lend significance to and therefore how and where we act. Therefore you will also find some articles that elevate this dimension.

The reader is designed in such a way as you can really start anywhere, guided by your questions and interests. However, there is also some sense of sequence to the five thematic sections within the reader - Concepts and Context, Social Enterprise in Human Services and Affordable Housing, Natural Resources, Local Development and Social Enterprise, Spinning the Web of Supports: Building the Infrastructure of the Social Economy and Tracking Progress: Some Issues and Tools.

Each of these sections begins with an introductory commentary. Reading these before diving into a particular section will be helpful. The key questions and themes the contributions explore are introduced. Where useful I try to help make the connections between articles within and across the five thematic sections that are the organizing rubric for this volume.

There is a unique feature that has been built into this book as well. After the introductory comments a type of annotation for each article in the section is provided. Reading these in advance serves two purposes. First, the annotations build on each other with many cross-references to both concepts and practices provided, thus easing the navigation for those with particular interests. Second, reading the introductions and annotations in sequence can have some value identifying and following lines of content and analysis. While this feature in no way does justice to the rich and insightful content of the ??? contributions that make up this volume, it will be helpful to some busy readers.

Another feature that some will find useful, especially students and other collaborators in the BALTA alliance is that each of the annotations include the author, date, whether a contributor is a member of the BALTA (*the name is in italics if the person is a member*) and, directly following the title, numbers which indicate which of the research questions the article is relevant to.

Lastly, this volume is a first edition that will be thoroughly revised in 2010 after which it will be published in hard cover and well as electronically. Your collaboration in providing feedback about what you like and do not like would be of tremendous use to this anticipated project. I strongly encourage you to note your bouquets and your brickbats and accompanying rationale and communicate them to me. In addition, articles or papers that you think do a better job of representing a particular point or which provide updated evidence relevant to future readers, please send them electronically or by mail to.

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Thank you for your collaboration and may your reading and ruminations be fruitful.