

There is an alternative!

by Stephen Aguilar-Millan

The case against market

capitalism has been well rehearsed in recent years. It is a system that results in a polarisation of society into the 'haves' and the 'have nots' on a global scale, it is a system that has overseen environmental degradation on a planetary scale, and it is a system that encourages the corruption of politics. Democratic institutions have moved from 'one person, one vote' to 'one dollar, one vote'. In a society characterised by inequality of wealth, money talks. It is no surprise that many in western societies are disenchanted with politics.

This we all know. However, as we experience the regular crises that are a feature of market capitalism, the policy response is always to return to business as usual. In part, this is a reflection of the vested interests that wish a return to the status quo ex ante. They have a lot to gain from perpetuating the system, even if it doesn't work for everyone, and even if, periodically, it collapses in on itself. However, the proponents of change are hampered by one serious obstacle – they don't have a credible alternative to the way in which things are.

And yet alternatives do

exist. If you think about it, countries like Spain or Greece or Portugal have mass unemployment amongst their young people. What do they do all day? How do they spend their time? Some will spend their time lounging around, watching TV, and allowing their lives to drain away.

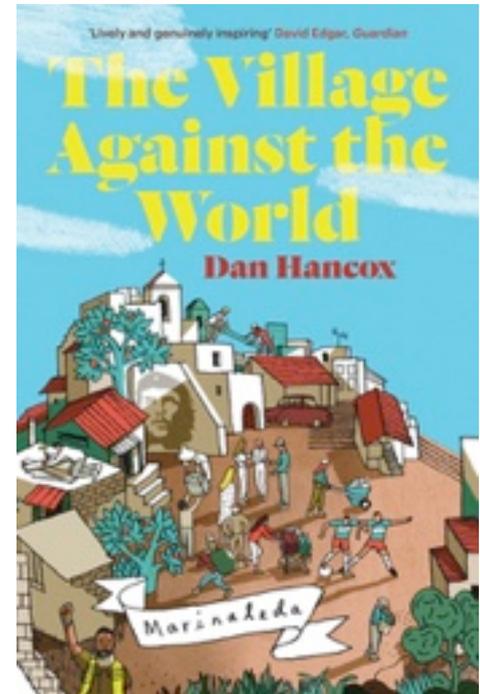
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Others, on the other hand, make use of the time which they have been given. They are building their lives without money. They are working on productive enterprises outside of the system created by global capitalism. Yet what they lack is a system of organisation to rival that of global capitalism, a credible alternative.

This background illustrates the significance of this book. It outlines a system to rival global capitalism as a way of organising our affairs. It is an inspiration to create a different way of doing things, a vision of how things could be.

The book tells the story of Marinaleda – a small, almost insignificant, village in Andalucia. In the 1980s, faced with the collapse of the local economy, a group of dispossessed agricultural day workers – the *jornaleros* – occupied part of the estate of an absentee landlord and started to work it for themselves. The book outlines the tale of what happened next. The highlights are that the land they occupied was eventually granted to them, they organised a co-operative undertaking to manage the work of the estate, they established a democracy to make decisions for the co-operative, they used the surpluses from the co-operative to build a community with its own facilities, and then they set out to proselytise to a sceptical world.

In doing this, the system that they have created has a number of features that could be used in other contexts. They seem to be



The Village Against The World

by Dan Hancox

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very influenced by the political philosophy of Bakunin. It draws upon a communitarian approach. The village sees itself as a relatively self-sustaining unit that regulates itself without the need for state enforcement mechanisms, power hierarchies, and the desire for profit. The desire is to be part of a federated network of similar communities that meet each others needs through mutual support. In doing so, the mechanism of the market is not abandoned; it is made the servant and not the master of the relationship.

An essential feature of this system is that it operates on a small, almost personal, scale. There is little room for large organisations. This one change has a number of profound implications. Our current economy operates at large scale as a result of high levels of specialisation. If the scale of operation were to be reduced, from the corporate to the personal, then the vast accumulations of capital – the heart of the capitalist system - would be unnecessary.

The system still uses the market as a means of allocating resources, but it does not provide for the accumulation of capital. Any accumulated surpluses made are used for the benefit of the community rather than for personal enrichment. A key point in the book is the view that ‘the land belongs to those who work it’.

This sounds very utopian, but could it be used as an alternative to global capitalism? We are told that the value in modern companies lies in the staff working in the companies. ‘Our staff is our greatest asset’ is the mantra. Indeed, much of the valuation in modern corporations lies not in the physical assets they command, but in the intangible assets they can draw upon. Who owns these intangible assets? Normally they are embodied in the heads of the staff working in the corporation. This is where the

know-how, the contacts, the creativity, resides. In this respect, the company belongs to those who work in it. If we add to this an overlay of modern networking technology to empower and connect the staff, then we have the potential for a very different way of doing things in the years to come.

It could be objected that the book conveys a romanticised tale of a very small agricultural village, which has very little significance in the wider context of a global economy. This would be true. The tale is romanticised. The author is very sympathetic to the village, although there is balance in the work as the detractors to the tale are given a fair hearing. There are important questions about the extent to which the village is dependent upon public subsidies and the extent to which its system could be scaled up. However, all of this misses the point.

The point is that the book has outlined the ways in which a small village—the village against the world – has provided an example of an alternative way. That in itself is why this book is worth paying attention to. That is why I recommend that you read it. ◀



Images:

Above: Marinaleda’s official village seal. (Source: Wikimedia, under a [Creative Commons licence](#).)

Below: the village’s subsidised housing. (Source: [naturalezartificial](#), under a [Creative Commons licence](#)).

