

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Not Quite Everything

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BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTABLE TITLES

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Not Quite Everything

Nathan Schneider's chronicle of the cooperative movement dazzles with stories but is short on solutions.

REVIEW BY GAR ALPEROVITZ

Nathan Schneider's *Everything for Everyone: The Radical Tradition that Is Shaping the Next Economy* is a whirlwind tour of the cooperative movement flourishing in our digitally connected global society. A professor of media studies as well as a journalist, Schneider, and his collaborator, the scholar-activist Trebor Scholz, are responsible for some of the more inventive digital efforts unfolding under the name of "platform cooperativism," which they define as an effort to develop "shared governance and shared ownership of the Internet's levers of power."

Schneider's expertise, passion, and sense for new possibilities shine through the stories that unite his book. These narratives are drawn from his own extensive travels; from the caves of Matera, Italy, where he talks about rediscovering the rules of monastic life as a template for networked cooperation with young activists who are experimenting there with self-imposed exile in the 21st century digital monasteries, to the streets of Jackson, Mississippi, where he discusses how to remake the economy of the Deep South based on cooperative enterprise with veteran organizers for Black liberation. Schneider writes with a journalistic objectivity that conveys a sense of deep personal commitment by honoring the work of generations that laid the foundations for the contemporary cooperative movement.

Such commitment is necessary, especially in perilous times. One of the many historical gems in *Everything* is an eye-popping quote from 1930s socialist Norman Thomas: "The only effective answer to the totalitarian state of fascism is the cooperative commonwealth." It's perhaps no surprise that the latter—the vision of

a new society based in cooperative enterprise—has become relevant once again when the former is distressingly reemergent. In moments of crisis, alternative visions and ideas can serve as novel solutions. In the 1930s, the United States managed to chart a narrow third course—a "new deal" that struck a fragile balance of corporate and union power—between industrial capitalism and the welfare state. But even as the New Deal focused on regulation and redistribution, the socialist dream of the cooperative commonwealth, transforming not just outcomes but the underlying ownership of the economy, was realized in local and federal government programs, especially in rural areas, where government loans to nascent cooperatives, for example, brought electricity to large swaths of the country.

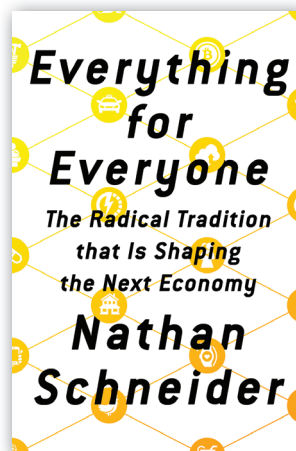
Much like the age of electrification—as Schneider is right to insist—our digital age poses unresolved questions about access

and power: Who can connect, and to whom, and under what terms? And just as with the advent of electric power, this digital revolution continues to inspire dreams of a transformed future. Fueled by speculative capital, these dreams have unfolded as promises of ease and convenience, a thousand-and-one services remaking the world as a cacophony of "disruption."

With digital power reconcentrating and networks recentralizing under corporate control, Schneider and Scholz imagined the platform cooperative as a way to address the "nagging questions of ownership and governance" left out of the vague promises of digital disruption. The platform cooperative enabled them to advocate for a commitment to realizing concrete forms of democratic ownership: An Uber owned by its drivers. A Twitter owned by its users. An Amazon owned by everyone.

Schneider, as a participant and an observer, is well-positioned to both tell the story of this movement and its milieu and document the attempts to salvage the dream of networked cooperation and digital democracy from Silicon Valley's nightmarish trajectory. His account highlights the spiritual impulse behind these efforts to create digital alternatives in order to find new ways of working and living with each other in cooperative economic models based in a desire for community. Equally important, Schneider explains the tensions that emerge as the spiritual visions for a new culture come into conflict with the realities of actual business development and real-world collective decision making that are contentious, slow, and messy. Like Schneider, for whom "economy is a form of culture," I believe that questions of culture and the institutional forms that produce and sustain it are essential for any serious political vision.

However, it is because of these shared concerns that I ultimately feel Schneider's important book fundamentally misses the mark: He gestures toward the absolutely critical questions about the relationship between economic and cultural life, but too often refuses to answer them. Instead, he



EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE:
The Radical Tradition that Is
Shaping the Next Economy

By Nathan Schneider
304 pages, Nation Books, 2018

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skates around the contradictions that his work reveals and quickly moves on to the next anecdote. For example, cooperatives do not *by themselves* construct either a renewed culture or an alternative political or economic system. Faced with a multiplicity of cooperative economic institutions that happily coexist with each other and our existing economic system, and that lack a shared commitment to socioeconomic transformation, Schneider himself comments that “portions of the commonwealth have trouble noticing each other.” But is this lack of recognition simply an accident of history? Or are there good reasons to think that Ocean Spray, the Associated Press, and the international credit card interchange system—while technically

leadership. Here, what matters is the movement to build local power, rather than the cooperative form itself.

In elevating cooperatives, Schneider leads the reader to mistake the model for the system. This mistake has political consequences, because our focus needs to be on changing the system, not just replicating models. By elevating cooperatives into one of the “candidate regimes” for building a new social model, *Everything* blurs the line between economic instrument and systemic vision. Schneider’s account invites us to imagine a movement fragmented in its history and full of moments of hidden potential and rediscovery, despite co-ops’ inefficiency alone to exact systemic change: “co-ops are not an

nizing effort that took back the city government during the financial crisis. Under Colau’s leadership, Barcelona has pursued a “fearless city” agenda, launching a publicly owned energy company and moving toward deprivatization in other sectors, including water, housing, and banking. Barcelona is in the process of establishing a democratized economy, with a politics that’s more than just a collective act of refusal and exodus. An account of the complete context that makes both Duran’s bottom-up network organizing and the citizen platform Barcelona en Comú’s top-down—but with the people in charge—leadership possible, and the respective challenges each are facing, would have provided a more holistic account of the politics and culture of Barcelona. Instead, Schneider’s tourist perspective produces a narrative that is laser-focused on cooperatives but invites little room for anything that doesn’t fit this framework. The result is an eclectic, decontextualized collection of anecdotes of experimentation at the margins.

While evocative and inspiring, *Everything* tells us little we need to know if we truly want to change the system. Cooperatives are undoubtedly important as models for a democratic economy, but changing the system is a different proposition from that of proposing more cooperatives, and the “next big idea” thrust of Schneider’s book risks overselling the power of the latter. Take worker cooperatives, for instance: While intuitively appealing, the truth is that no country has ever been able to create a worker-cooperative sector that includes more than a very tiny percentage of the workforce. We are likely to find ourselves in a blind alley if we center our vision of the future on worker cooperatives alone. In response, I’ve called for a “pluralist commonwealth” in order to make explicit the elements at different scales that were already present in the populist call for a cooperative commonwealth—notably the transformation of monetary policy and the public ownership of large industries (“public” as in national or sub-national forms like the regional scale Tennessee Valley Authority). A pluralist approach to a systemic economic vision gives

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cooperatives—may simply not be playing on the same side as the idealistic young platform cooperators trying to remake the world that Schneider spotlights?

In *Everything*, Schneider occasionally recognizes the problem—that cooperative ownership, absent of a politics and culture committed to a transformative vision, doesn’t by itself deliver the desired change. For instance, the Italian cooperative movement has experienced rapid scaling that has resulted in businesses looking increasingly like their capitalist competitors, and which, Schneider observes, leave a younger generation unsatisfied and in search for more radical alternatives. Or, consider the electrical cooperatives of the Deep South, which arguably have stymied economic and racial justice, even though they offer the *potential* for justice—this is a potential which the incredible organizers of One Voice and their Electric Cooperative Leadership Institute have seized upon by mobilizing poor black residents in Mississippi to take back their cooperatives from their sedimented white

end in themselves. They’re not a destination. But they’re the passageway to a peer-to-peer commons.” But clarifying how this “passageway” could operate is the question of political economy that can’t be answered by hand-waving. Is the “cooperative commonwealth” a subterranean network of affinity rooted in the shared use of an institutional form? Or is it a democratic-socialist program in which cooperatives are one part of the means to the endgame of justice?

Consider Schneider’s account of Barcelona, centered around the captivating figure of Enrique Duran, the anarchist bank robber made famous by his brazen acts of expropriation-through-debt in the lead up to the financial crisis and his later metamorphosis into tech entrepreneur, as the founder of the blockchain-powered, grassroots-centered Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC). Yet the cooperative lens that Schneider focuses on Catalonia’s grassroots movement for a new economy occludes Ada Colau, the activist-turned-mayor of Barcelona, and the remarkable place-based, anti-eviction orga-

us the ability to treat, with rigor, the question of institutional design at different levels, rather than assuming that one economic model holds the solution to all our problems. Answering the hard questions, about not just power, scale, and strategy, but also about how systems—and not just projects—relate to the underlying mobilizing and organizing force of culture and politics, is essential to the political project of advancing a serious shared vision of a transformed economy.

Despite Schneider's showcasing of diverse cooperative projects, his account ultimately

fails to reckon with the strategies for change appropriate for the world we *have* (rather than for the world we *want*). Is the platform cooperative and its promise of a business model for the 21st century the seed of an answer to our systemic issues? Or is it a small marginal phenomenon tolerated in the cracks of the current system but incapable of changing its underlying logic? The most frustrating moments of *Everything* are these—the ones where Schneider meets the hardest questions and falls back on rhetorical equivocation to avoid answering them. ■

Making Economic Sense of Religion

Sriya Iyer reveals how faith has driven India's increasingly powerful economy.

REVIEW BY KAVITA N. RAMDAS

What does religion have to do with economics, and vice versa? While these may seem disparate concerns, their deep historical connection drives Sriya Iyer's inquiry in *The Economics of Religion in India*, which endeavors to expand the study of religion through economic analysis and delves into the changing demographics of India's religious pluralism in relation to its global economic ascent.

The colonizing powers of Europe incorporated the Christian church's "civilizing mission" to justify the capture of lands that did not belong to them, the subjugation and oppression of people whose cultures and languages were foreign to them, and the exploitation of resources to fatten their coffers. An almighty sanction was invoked by the conquerors to legitimize the genocide of indigenous peoples across the New World; promote slavery in the United States, the Americas, and around the globe; and motivate the Opium Wars, which the British East India Company used to seize Chinese markets while forcing

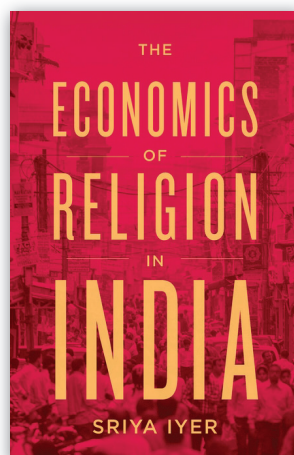
Indian peasants to grow poppies instead of life-sustaining rice or vegetables.

Iyer wrote the book to "encourage economists to bring their insights and methods to bear on the study of religion," which she believes would be beneficial for developing countries, such as India, that are character-

ized by their religious pluralism. Iyer, for example, uses statistical analyses of newspaper reporting on what India refers to as "communal riots"—conflicts between two different religious communities that lead to life and property loss and damage—in order to reveal their causes. She finds a strong correlation between such turmoil and state-election years; these riots are instigated by political parties hoping to rile up the Hindu base and target Muslims, who are concentrated in urban areas. These findings are further interrogated in Iyer's unique survey of religious organizations in seven of India's 29 states seeking to understand better how different religious communities have responded to economic shifts as India transformed its economy. The survey also allows her to test her hypothesis that religions increase their provision of services as a rational response to perceived economic inequality and competition. The fascinating responses to the questions explain how rapid economic liberalization in India after 1991 compelled religious organizations of every stripe to offer increased levels of services to address growing inequality.

Iyer points to economic data to discredit the Hindu Nationalists' scare tactics about Muslims having too many children and thereby fundamentally changing India's demographics. She shows that high fertility rates are closely correlated with low education and income levels rather than with religious beliefs. The impressive work of the 2007 Rajinder Sachar Committee, which reported on the impoverished living conditions of Muslims in India, clarifies the many disadvantages the Muslim community has experienced in India since independence, including being vulnerable targets of hate crimes.

These startling findings justify the use of economic analysis to understand religion. However, Iyer's argument is weakened by its reliance on reductive connections, two of which are the tendency to equate religion in India with Hinduism and to use myopic and elitist descriptions and definitions of Hinduism. Hinduism and India are not synonymous, despite the best efforts of the current



THE ECONOMICS OF RELIGION IN INDIA

By Sriya Iyer
304 pages, The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press, 2018