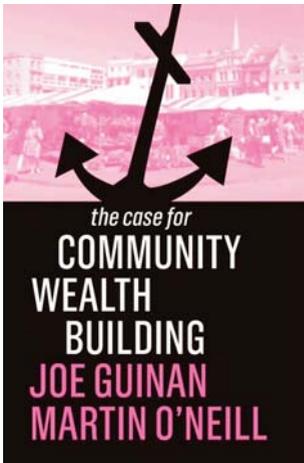


# Locality

*Tony Simpson*



Following the disastrous December 2019 UK General Election, John McDonnell MP convened a series of seminars at Westminster, one of which focused on the Lucas Plan for socially useful production of the 1970s. John McDonnell was coming to the end of his four-year stint as Jeremy Corbyn's main spokesman on economy, shadowing the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer. During his tenure, McDonnell had made a point of engaging with activists in developing Labour's economic policy. So it was that McDonnell opened the facilities of the Westminster Parliament to such wide-ranging and democratic discussion during the dying days of the Corbyn leadership. The great pity is that the office of the Leader of the Opposition had signally failed to act as openly during Corbyn's occupancy from 2015.

During the discussion, McDonnell explained how the Corbyn team had consulted the Communication Workers' Union on Labour's developing policy of free broadband for every home, which was announced at the start of the 2019 General Election campaign. Labour wanted people to look to public provision in areas additional to health and education. It all sounded eminently sensible and socialist, yet it was the first time I had heard it expressed in this way. Disappointingly, the Corbyn leadership had failed to democratise its own proceedings so that such innovative policies had a chance to grow deep roots and blossom in the wider community.

It was onto this vacant plot that *The Case for Community Wealth Building* descended. The cover of this slender volume by Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill features an

anchor rather than a parachute, for reasons that will become clear. The book evokes Labour's long-running engagement with locality and lists the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) as one of its 'Resources for Action'. Back in 1991, CLES had published Robin Murray's *Local Space: Europe and the New Regionalism — Economic Practice and Policies for the 1990s*. But Guinan and O'Neill mostly steer clear of the European space. Indeed, the few actual examples of community wealth building, notwithstanding nods towards the City of Preston, come from the United States. Thus:

*'The original model of Community Wealth Building is the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland lost half its population and most of its Fortune 500 companies due to deindustrialisation, disinvestment, and capital flight. But it still had very large nonprofit and quasi-public institutions such as the Cleveland Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, and University Hospitals — known as **anchor institutions** because they are rooted in place and aren't likely to up and leave. Together these three institutions, themselves largely dependent on flows of public funds and favourable tax treatment, spent around \$3 billion per year — very little of which was going to the local community.'* (p10-11)

*'... Cooperative Home Care Associates in the Bronx, the largest worker co-op in America, made up of some 2,300 predominantly female workers, most of them immigrant women of colour, about half of whom are worker-owners.'* (p25)

*The Case for Community Wealth Building* provides one 'starting point' to discuss socialist ownership and political systems, to recall Wlodzimierz Brus's memorable 1975 title about experiences in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Co-operative ownership, in theory and practice, presents one tried and tested alternative to private ownership. But the tensions implicit in the workplace are for real. That is why we need more detailed guidance about possible ways forward, such as those set out by Dexter Whitfield in *Public Alternative to the Privatisation of Life*. These are based on a lifetime's experience of the public sector and fending off those who seek personal gain from it.

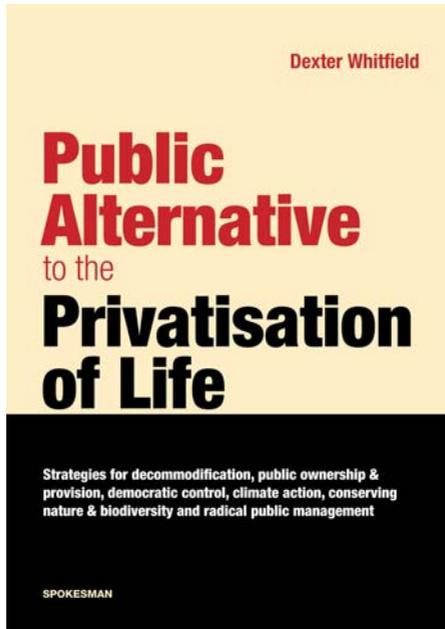
Bertrand Russell summarised the political dilemma in 1919 in his essay 'Why I am a Guildsman':

*'... the present system of private capitalism is to be condemned on*

*account of its cruelty, rapacity and oppression, its tendency to promote wars, its hostility to enlightenment, and its extreme restriction of personal initiative. State Socialism is to be feared because, though it might cure poverty and secure economic justice, it would probably soon become rigid and Byzantine, even more hostile to initiative than the present system, and probably as favourable to misinformation as even the capitalist Press. Anarchism, which aims at avoiding these evils, would place no obstacles in the way of brigandage, and would probably soon end in a military tyranny. If the dangers of anarchism are to be avoided, and the evils of the existing system are to be remedied, Guild Socialism seems to me the plan which involves least of the evils to be feared under State Socialism. I believe that it is capable, not only of putting an end to poverty and economic injustice, but of securing the greatest sum of liberty and initiative that is possible to human nature at its present stage of development.'*

Are we in a very different place now?

*The case for Community Wealth Building, Joe Guinan, Martin O'Neill, Polity, 2020, £9.99*



**Public Alternative to the Privatisation of Life**, Dexter Whitfield, Spokesman Books, 2020, £25 paperback, £15 eBook & PDF