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Hedva Sarfati

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Recensions / Book Reviews

Kill it to save it – An Autopsy of Capitalism’s Triumph over Democracy

By Corey Dolgon (2017) Bristol: Policy Press, University of Bristol, 308 pages.
ISBN: 978-14473-1712-8.

This book is a timely contribution to the growing concern over the past few years about the rising threats to democracy in the advanced economies, following decades of spreading neoliberalism, associated with globalization, accelerated technological change and rising inequality in income and wealth distribution. Their impact has been further aggravated by the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis by the disruption of labour markets, rising unemployment, exclusion, poverty and “disenfranchising” of the middle-class. All of which generated frustration and loss of confidence in the ruling elites, institutions, “established” experts and culture, disrupting political consensus and traditional political parties, threatening to gradually transmute into populism, nationalism and protectionism. To avoid such deleterious outcome, it is essential to understand the institutional, social and economic features of this process. This is the ambition of this book.

The author, Professor Corey Dolgon, a sociologist, who, as a “late baby boomer” has been in a privileged position to observe, in his own suburban middle-class community and at various universities, the deterioration of the economic, political and social system, gradually ripping apart democracy by its own contradictions. This insidious transformation, which took place between 1960 and the early 2000s, included increased inequality, weakening public institutions and infrastructures, depriving citizens of good public education, safe food and environment, reasonable health coverage and a certain social mobility. Dolgon was particularly intrigued by the broad acceptance by society, and voters, of policies

that led to such adverse outcomes, which was tantamount to voters’ denial of self-interest and collective well-being, leading to the rise of populism and to the election by a wide margin of Donald Trump as President. In his view, this counter-intuitive dramatic change stems from a new ideological paradigm of “corporate hegemony” and “hyper-individualism”. It shaped policy making, guiding and legitimizing convergence of neoconservative and neoliberal policies among white working-, middle- and professional class voters, who, earlier on, wholly endorsed the *New Deal* and its emergent welfare state. This new paradigm pretends to “save” individuals’ freedom by “killing” the public sector through privatising its services and institutions—hence the book’s main title *Kill it to save it*. This strategy was supposed to “save” the economy and corporations by deregulating environmental standards and labour rights and reducing corporations’ related costs (e.g. wages, working conditions, job protection, health coverage)—which actually represented the “American dream” of industrial workers and the middle-class. Beyond limiting government’s ability to regulate, tax and spend, this ideology seeks to stimulate the economy by increasing corporate profits and discharging corporations from their social responsibilities, while encouraging individuals to compete freely, regardless of social or public concerns. Voters’ acceptance of such a destructive process is achieved by a massive use of corporate social media that disseminates round-the clock information that is purged from conflicting views, news, analysis or historical context. Its purpose is to limit citizens’ ability to reason, discern or debate any given situation, and prevent their capacity to react to or challenge any major policy or its outcomes (e.g. mass shootings, poor quality and rarity of mental health care, increasing poverty, ill-health and obesity associated with junk food, industrialised farming and deteriorating environment).

The book consists four parts that focus successively on the origins of the ideology and the related policies and institutions (Part 1), their adverse impact on the education system in the wake of privatization (Part 2), on the health system and ill health due to junk food and environment (Part 3), and on the economy and government (Part 4).

Part 1. The author starts by analysing the historical, political and social underpinnings of the “kill it to save it” ideology that originated in the Vietnam War, where the destruction of homes and villages was supposed to save people’s lives. The ideology was imported to, and developed in America in the aftermath of war. The latter destroyed many American myths about itself, giving rise to doubts, fears and panic that replaced former optimism and hope that characterised the *New Deal’s* social policies. This process coincided with the unravelling of social and civil rights movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was quickly replaced by ultra-conservatism between Nixon’s demise in the 1970s and Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s. Typically, while President Carter, in his 1979 “crisis of confidence” speech, July, 1979), drew a gloomy picture of declining economic power, political hegemony and social and cultural values, he associated it with the prevalent political corruption, mass consumption, growing selfishness and ignorance. He had little remedy to offer to the younger generation beyond reflection, sacrifice and patience... While President Reagan relied on the older myths about freedom and greatness, blaming victims of poverty and inequality for the failing economic and social policies (Chapter 1).

The Reagan-Bush years promoted a cultural transformation that promoted corporate hegemony, consumerism and economic growth centred on hyper-individualism. This enabled politicians to base social narratives on myths, ignoring facts, enabling them to turn policy failures into ideological successes (i.e. persuading citizens

that the quadrupling of national debt since 1980 resulted from welfare liberalism, though the latter was almost non-existent for another two decades...). Reagan’s tax cuts for the rich not only increased public deficit and debt, but, despite cuts in public spending on health, education, and infrastructure, resulted in restricted economic growth, reduced social mobility, and rising economic inequality. Acceptance of such narratives illustrates the successful dismantling of citizens’ critical thinking, which may be partly explained by the broad social acceptance of the “trickle-down economics”, that is supposed to facilitate wealth creation, which promotes investment, economic growth and upward social mobility. Dolgon argues that some economic growth is better than others, particularly when it improves the general welfare (expanding health coverage, addressing climate change issues), creates well-paying jobs and distributes more widely and evenly economic prosperity (Chapter 2).

Part 2 deals with the devastating impact of the “kill it to save it” ideology on the American education system attributed to its privatization, which was promoted by Lehman Brothers’ equity strategists, since the mid-1990s. They considered the shortcomings of public schools (pointing to their little accountability and non-exposure to competition, and the growing pressures for educational reform), arguing that private schools were better equipped to deal with the growing financial and social challenges, while offering opportunity for a high-return on investment. Offering a secular overview of American education policies, Dolgon warns that the profit motivation risks overshadowing the basic mission of the education system that society expects from it. This includes: first, its ability to reproduce society’s basic values and necessary skills, enabling pupils to act effectively in a highly stratified economic, social and political system; and, second, equipping students with critical and analytical skills to enable them to compete,

innovate and change, and, ideally, enhancing equal opportunities. But the history of learning outcomes since the 18th century shows that the education system has been disempowering certain groups of citizens—by prohibiting teaching of reading and writing to slaves (African Americans), or by focusing on “assimilation” of “minorities” (American Indians, Mexicans etc.), which limited their upward social mobility potential. Post-1945 education—especially higher education—was harnessed to the changing needs of the millions of veterans, the economy, and corporations. Civil rights movements of the 1960s brought about sweeping changes to education from kindergartens to universities, by including programmes such as *War on Poverty* or *Head Start* for poor children or children from ‘minorities’. However, by the 1970s, conservative court decisions and the gradual spread of the “kill it to save it” ideology limited their reform scope and purpose, while the spread of private education in the 1990s, notably the much vaunted “charter schools”, which have been meeting with growing criticisms by some states and academic studies for not being as innovative or improving academic performance as expected, practicing biased testing and miss-measuring of students’ and teachers’ performance, suffering high teachers turnover, and... deepening race and income segregation. Yet, “charter schools” are still popular because their curriculum and design are associated with professional career training and marketable skill development (Chapter 3).

Turning to higher education, the stagnation in federal funding for research led to reliance on corporate funding for basic research and shared intellectual property rights, often leading to corporate spin-offs and recruitment of teachers and students. This risks reorienting research towards the primary interest of corporations, and “commodifying” knowledge, students and teaching staff. Though Dolgon acknowledges that research and teaching, the

primary functions of higher education, still survive, and should be capable of addressing some social inequalities, for example by granting student loan forbearance and free public education, and reducing teaching emphasis on neoliberalism and hyper-corporate individualism (Chapter 4).

Part 3 starts with an overview of health and health care history in the US, recalling that President Franklin D. Roosevelt included the “right to health care” in his *Second Bill of Rights Speech* (1944), but was unable to pass a national health plan as part of *Social Security Bill* because of the tough resistance of the AMA (American Medical Association) and private insurers, who threatened to defeat the entire social security bill if health coverage were included... Basic health insurance for the elderly (Medicaid) and for poor families and younger disabled people (Medicare) had to wait for President Johnson’s *War on Poverty* (1964), while a major extension of health insurance coverage took another 5 decades to be introduced by President Obama (N.B.: the 2010 *Obamacare* is now challenged by President Trump...). Dolgon points out that, until recently, most debates on health care related to accessibility and effectiveness of health insurance in case of disease, whereas the greatest challenge nowadays is the ability to avoid getting sick. A concern that is closely associated with inequality that adversely hits poor people’s health (i.e. bad food, poor shelter, water and air pollution, stress and little or no access to quality care...). This is also aggravated by the heavy promotion of junk food and disinformation about safety and health, which results in the dramatic increase in obesity and diabetes in the population (Chapter 5).

The big chemical corporations are accused for using scientists to challenge critics of pesticides and genetically modified food; and tobacco companies for trying to obscure or deny scientific evidence about health risks of smoking, using heavy advertising to prevent the public from demand-

ing, and government from introducing regulations to protect health and safety. The same applies to reducing greenhouse gas under President G. W. Bush (and President Trump...). Hence Dolgon's provocative reference to "junk science, junk advertisement and junk media" that encourages people to massively buy and consume these products (Chapter 6).

This widening gap between people's experience and public policy-making also leads "junk freedom" of gun ownership and mass shootings, many of which are linked to homophobia, racism and terrorism. And yet, owning and carrying guns... has come to symbolise "American freedom"—which Dolgon contests as junk freedom, because it is not universal, as it doesn't apply to access education and health care, nor to access to decent jobs with living wages, nor to the right to basic food, clothing and shelter, or, lately, even the right to vote. Yet, the lack of these latter freedoms does not make Americans feel free, while guns, surprisingly, do... (Chapter 7).

Part 4 focuses on the "death of America's economy and government" expected from the prevalence of the "kill it to save it" ideology, which is supported by the major political and corporate actors, who redesigned American democracy and economics by using a "common sense austerity" to destroy the public interest. This part recapitulates how this approach was applied to the main policy issues addressed in the book—education, health care, environment, civil rights, rising corporatism—leading to the decline of democracy, the loss of legitimacy of political parties, and to the rise of populism (Chapters 8, 9 and 10).

In the *Epilogue* Dolgon suggests that the "kill it to save it" ideology can (and should) be defeated by popular movements, mass protests and alternative politics, policies and practices... This is by no means an easy task, even though the desire for change was manifest in both Trump's and Sanders' recent election campaigns, which called

into question the status quo! Nevertheless, he cautions that Trump's victory and broad popular backing suggest that opposition to public institutions and public interest will continue, so the "kill it to save it" ideology is bound to prevail in the coming years... However, the shortcomings of neoliberal austerity and the extent of degradation of democracy now put at risk the economy, the society and the environment. They therefore must be stopped. Nevertheless, to succeed, they need a clear, subtle and accessible criticism of who has power and how it is being used, in order to challenge convincingly the ideology of corporate hegemony and hyper-individualism. Though, he concedes, this is by no means an easy task.

This book contains harsh criticism of the American way-of-life, social decline, and severe economic and cultural "glitches". It identified the main failures, education, health systems, nutrition, environment, insurance, economy and the governance of the US political institutions and corporations. All are abundantly and thoroughly documented, constituting a precious trove of information and analysis for policy makers, "social partners", NGOs and researchers in quest of policies and consensus-building for barring the road to populism by strengthening democracy that should lead to an economy and society with a human face.

Hedva Sarfati

Former Director, ILO Industrial Relations Department
Labour market and welfare reforms consultant

Dialogue social, relations du travail et syndicalisme: perspectives historiques et internationales

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Le sens commun de la notion de « dialogue social » fait souvent d'elle le synonyme d'un processus démocratique nous invitant à