

Review: "What Then Must We Do?"

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 4, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

Gar Alperovitz's book *What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution* is the worst book you really should read.

I say this is a bad book because it is written in a chatty, conversational style that grows tired after five paragraphs, bothersome after five pages, and makes continuing really hard. As well, there are certain sentences such as this: "A strategic and self-conscious decision by committed activists to further an ongoing and longer course of institution-changing action — one linked to ongoing movement-building and explicitly understood as a way to potentially begin to lay the groundwork for something more." make me want to scream: Where is the editor? For starters, there is no verb in that sentence!

Nonetheless, this is an important book and the effort to read it rewards the mind. While many policy books analyze this problem or that, this looks at the systemic problem facing our nation, "the large corporate-dominated economic system and the heavily constrained political system that set the terms of reference for almost everything else." The evidence for system-wide failure is beyond obvious and Alperovitz is comprehensive in his lists. He notes that the share of income taken by the top one percent of Americans has risen from 10 percent to about 20 percent in three decades, that marginal tax rates for the top bracket have been slashed by more than 50 percent since 1950, and corporate tax rates have declined from 32.1 percent of federal revenues in 1952 down to 15.1 percent in 1972, and all the way down to 7.9 percent in 2012. Greenhouse gas emissions are up, as is the number of citizens in federal prison. For forty years, there has been virtually no change in the number of people living in poverty in the U.S. The picture he paints is indeed grim.

As depressing as the concentration of wealth is the inability of the political system to free itself from the power of corporate America. It is not just the vast sums spent on campaigns that frustrate the popular will, but the huge sums spent and built-in advantages corporations have in navigating government regulations. Not only can corporations donate to politicians who support this regulation or oppose that, they know that their high paid lawyers are usually negotiating with an underpaid government employee. Someday, that government employee may want to sit on the other side of the conference table. So, even the potential to use the authority of the government to regulate corporations on behalf of the common good is greatly diminished and highly, systemically compromised.

Alperovitz rightly notes that progressive opposition to these trends usually embrace the kinds of policies and strategies that worked in previous eras of progressive reform. But, he notes that the two great periods of reform, the FDR and LBJ years, are unlikely to be repeated in part because, happily, we are unlikely to endure another Great Depression or another cataclysmic world war, which served to prompt profound measures in the FDR years, and the great post-war economic boon that made the Great Society programs possible under LBJ's tenure. The problems today manifest themselves more slowly, but no less surely. When they reach crisis point, he rightly notes that we must all be on our guard against the temptations of authoritarian rule which is how Germany and Italy and Spain confronted the Great Depression and the social ills it produced.

Another problem facing those of us who, like Alperovitz, hope for a more progressive politics, is the decline in the influence of organized labor. He writes: "This is the simple fact that a capacity to alter big trends in virtually all advanced nations has almost always depended in significant part on the strength not simply of politics in general, and not only of movements in general, but also on the existence of powerful *institutions*" above all, labor unions. Unions, like corporations, have the capacity to straddle the economic and the political life of the nation. Their declining influence is directly related to the growth in corporate power. Perhaps the road to serfdom can take several avenues.

Alperovitz notes that many progressives have been happy as successes they have achieved in terms of civil rights, feminism and gay rights. But, he makes a very salient point about these developments. "What this has all been about is *getting into the existing system*. Not changing it," he writes. "The battle for equality on all these fronts has largely been about rights, and about fulfilling the enduring elements of the individualist American culture." Bingo. Here, and elsewhere in the book, one wishes Alperovitz had raised the question at the heart of Catholic social thought. The question of the human person. He does not make a case why libertarian sensibilities are fine in the bedroom but evil in the boardroom. He makes interesting points about the unfulfilled promise of the civil rights movement, how the advances in legal rights were not matched by advancement in social equality. But, the dog that does not bark is Christian personalism and the book would have been better if it had bark.

I shall conclude this review on Monday. Now, out to the beach before heading back to DC.

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