

**Scott Myers-Lipton. *Rebuild America: Solving the Economic Crisis through Civic Works*. Paradigm Publishers, 2009. Pp. 160. \$17.95 (paper). ISBN 978-1594517228**

**Reviewer: John Asimakopoulos<sup>1</sup>**

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The book is a good case study as to how educators can transform theory into action that will improve society. Using this model, activists, scholars, artists, and citizens can take direct action in the political arena of everyday life.

However, this form of direct action needs to be situated within a broader radical model of new socioeconomic relations that would provide structural long-term reform. For example, a libertarian socialist would envision models of movement building similar to those developed in the book but tied to broader goals of fundamental social change, based on the principles of local self-direction and self-organization, as well as political and economic democracy.

The book makes no mention of how proposed massive civic works programs would be financed and sustained at the state level, let alone on a national scale. Again, the reason for the omission is obvious. Because the rich and the corporations control the political process and dominate the economy, they will avoid paying for public projects. The New Deal Era civic programs described by the author were in large part a response to the threat of revolution rather than being prompted by a desire for social justice. Today there is little sense that revolt is imminent, and therefore there is no pressure to act. The solutions proposed in this book fall short, like all projects and proposals that fail to confront the true cause of poverty and crumbling public infrastructure: capitalism. Only structural

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changes that alter capitalist relations can affect true lasting change. Anything less is simply an academic exercise in hopeless hope...

From the preface, it is clear that this is a book on public policy using New Orleans as a case study to champion civic works to reduce poverty and create a basis for new economic foundations. Although the author makes a compelling case for public projects, the book lacks theoretical grounding. The work fails to recognize that the ills that it proposes to remedy are endemic and historically necessary in any capitalist system. Because he fails to identify the causes of poverty, Myers-Lipton cannot develop a solution that addresses social problems as an outcome of an unjust economic system. A proper solution would be to resist such a system. The book's emphasis on public works gives it a short-term pragmatism that does little more than save a system that by its very nature causes the problems the author wishes to alleviate. The book provides an interesting historical review of public works with little to offer those interested in structural solutions.

The first chapter begins with a review of the 2008-09 financial collapse and the mammoth bailouts of Wall Street at the expense of Main Street. It also looks at the roles of globalization, outsourcing, job destruction due to technology, union suppression since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, and regressive tax policies.

It continues with a list of crumbling infrastructure in need of repair—bridges, levees and dams, the electric grid, and schools. The chapter concludes with a review of the impact that Reaganite deregulation/laissez-faire had on the financial sector, subprime mortgages, and credit derivative markets. The author finally shares the (false) hope of many people that the new Obama administration will address these problems.

Chapter 2 gives additional historical background on the public works of the New Deal Era. It is argued these were effective and efficient programs rather than 'bridges to nowhere'. Based on this background, the author proceeds to advise president Obama with key recommendations which include effective oversight; a three-way partnership between the federal, state, and local governments; and equity with regard to who gets the contracts and jobs and which communities get the projects. The question arises as to whether to hire local workers or bring in the cheapest labor from around the world.

Chapter 3 goes over a works plan developed and promoted by a coalition of students, social justice, labor, and human rights groups. The Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (GCCW) was introduced to Congress on November 2, 2007. Its goals include employing over 100,000 local people

at living wages with training opportunities, artistic grants, and more. The hope is it becomes a model for a nationwide effort.

In this chapter we learn that the GCCW was born at San Jose State University in the classroom of the author who was teaching service-learning that integrates theory and action. Soon after, students recruited from around the country participated in the 'Louisiana Winter' trips (in memory of the 1964 'Mississippi Freedom Summer'). Students and local activists canvassed the community to create interest and local support. They also developed the draft federal bill by asking the communities and local people what their needs were.

Chapter 4 provides more details on the GCCW Act and the history of its revisions. The reader is reminded that the Act is modeled after New Deal public works legislation, and that strong federal oversight and local control are important components of the Act, along with emphasis on hiring local workers especially those from underprivileged groups. The book examines Obama's new emphasis on green technologies and jobs that provide prevailing wages, job training, and apprenticeship programs. The Act privileges small and medium size businesses over politically connected corporations that proceed to subcontract their contracts. The Act also provides for infrastructure development. However, the author points out that the economists argue that Obama's first stimulus package is barely one-third of what is needed to save the economy and begin rebuilding the nation.

The next chapter is a collection of two-page essays from ten experts in public policy including Howard Zinn on civic works projects and their suggestions. Frankly, the chapter seems and feels like little more than 'filler' for a book that reads like a long essay itself. The short essays raise important points but fail to develop them adequately.

In the final chapter the author ironically argues in favor of an economic Bill of Rights, quoting Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman on how capitalism cannot take care of the poor or even average citizens. He also mentions how their programs either failed to pass or were watered down. If this does not confirm capitalism as the root cause of social ills, then what does? The book concludes with the author's twelve lessons on social action e.g., think big; act humbly; emphasize commonalities when working in coalitions etc. Although this is not an indispensable book, it does serve as an excellent, and even inspiring, 'how to' manual for those who wish to put *theory into action*.