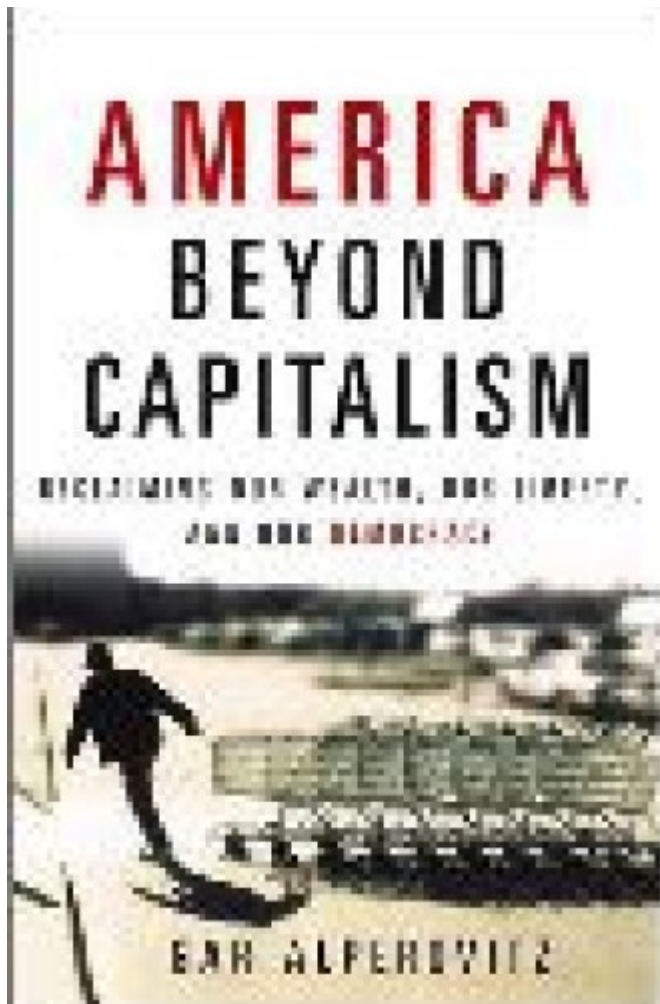


America Beyond Capitalism

reviewed by [David Mitchell](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

In Review



America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy

Gar Alperovitz
John Wiley

For those whose life involves a continuous dialogue between insights from their religious tradition and the seemingly intractable problems of the political-social-economic world, and who seek to connect a vision of a just society with practical action, Gar Alperovitz's *America Beyond Capitalism* will be a real treat.

Although Alperovitz's analysis is not explicitly directed to people of faith and does not invoke theological language, the book has many qualities of a prophetic work. Alperovitz offers a penetrating critique of the incongruities between the core values we profess as Americans and the outcomes produced by U.S. economic, political and social institutions. He also presents an imaginative vision of a new institutional order that would restore congruence while providing the capacity to address many of the major issues on the current national agenda. All of this work is rooted in a long-term historical perspective that helps the reader maintain a guarded optimism about the possibility of positive change.

Alperovitz's style is more suggestive than prescriptive. He points in a direction and identifies promising possibilities, rather than laying out a specific plan of action. This style has potential to engage readers: if they encounter an argument that does not seem quite persuasive, they need not reject the whole idea but can consider related alternative ideas. Alperovitz is also amazingly eclectic. He has drawn on a vast array of sources from many disciplines and from across the political spectrum. Although the main thrust of his analysis would justify classifying him as a progressive, he goes to considerable effort to show that many of his ideas have been endorsed by (and were drawn from) thinkers with impeccable conservative credentials. (Not the least of the book's merits is its 74 pages of notes.)

Among the book's many themes and ideas, three are central because they deal with democracy, equality and liberty, the core values of Alperovitz's analysis. The first central theme is the need for decentralization of economic and political structures so real democracy and community might flourish (and so the current wave of cynicism might be overcome). The second is the need for new models for owning and controlling wealth so it might more effectively serve the public good (and so the distortions created by current huge inequalities might be overcome). The third is the need to free up more time for nonwork activities so individuals might have the time needed for serious involvement in family and civic life (and so real freedom might exist).

Early in the book Alperovitz refers to the need to put ideas into ordinary English so ordinary people can discuss them. He performs extraordinarily well on his own test. Readers can engage with the book without feeling that the issues being discussed are beyond them. Although the author has all the credentials of a historically oriented political economist (he is a professor at the University of Maryland), he also has decades of experience working in the trenches of political and social change, so he knows how to communicate in nontechnical language.

I found much of Alperovitz's analysis quite provocative and convincing, but I did encounter several areas that need more work. First, although he addresses the issue of globalization and its potential impact on decentralization, I don't think he wrestles sufficiently with the issue of global power. Smaller may be better in many respects, but bigger still carries much of the weight in global power politics. In framing the mechanisms by which we might move to a more decentralized structure in the U.S., it is necessary to pay more attention to how that same approach can be promoted globally.

I also found less discussion than is merited on the issue of how decentralization is related to economies of scale. Although the author clearly recognizes that too much decentralization can lead to the inability to deal effectively with some types of problems, and although I would no doubt find much common ground with him on the issue of exaggerated claims about the efficiency of big operations, I still wonder whether Alperovitz has made too much of a one-size-fits-all assumption. At more than one point his analysis of a national problem seems to imply that the national level is still the appropriate one for action.

A closely related concern is what might happen to universal values under regionalization. If there is such a thing as universal values (and the U.S. fought the Civil War in part over that issue), will they be endangered by a devolution of power to regions? Could we see a race to the bottom if there is not some type of national standard? Are we already seeing a version of that on the international scene because we have not yet developed global standards or the mechanisms to protect and enforce them?

Finally, I found myself thinking at times that Alperovitz may underestimate how deeply rooted some of the contradictions in our culture are. If acceptance of huge inequalities is widespread in America, is that primarily because the public has been manipulated (and thus possesses a sort of false consciousness, as Marx would say)?

Can the problem be fixed by structural changes alone? Having watched the debate on eliminating the national inheritance tax, and having seen the state-level counterpart of that tax abolished in my state, I am impressed by the depth of many people's conviction that this form of wealth redistribution is somehow unethical and un-American.

These problematic areas in Alperovitz's analysis can be seen as a reflection of the open-ended nature of his prophetic vision, which points in a direction but does not pretend to spell out all the details of how to get there. That is the work of readers who choose to respond. If you decide to take the first step, be prepared for a mind-opening experience.