

Whyte meticulously traces how neoliberalism is constructed in a dualistic mindset permeated by arbitrary assumptions about human nature and social relations. In a series of close readings, she exposes how the “morals of the market” stand for adult responsibility and individual entrepreneurialism within a spontaneous order that prioritizes self-interest as well as commercial and consumerist values. Another exciting aspect of the book is how Whyte scrutinizes the “explicitly masculine subject” (94) of social and economic rights in the UDHR, and challenges the male breadwinner model of the nuclear family as the “model for the world” (95). In this respect, she sheds light on how the neoliberal ideal of professed self-reliance and independence was in fact conditioned upon women’s invisible domestic work, as well as on slave labor and colonial exploitation.

In the epilogue, Whyte returns full circle to what she hints at in the introduction. Looking at the contemporary work of human rights organizations that detach human rights from broader structural inequalities, Whyte warns that long-cherished neoliberal ideas can cross over to social movements and struggles that are led in the name of human rights. She thus alerts us to remain vigilant about whether we might be strengthening neoliberalism even while we use human rights language to contest it.

Throughout the book, Whyte does not resort to aphorisms about the ills of neoliberalism, or offer a dramatic prognosis about the fate of human rights. In an effortless and flowing writing style, Whyte confronts neoliberals with their own appalling words, woven into an astonishing and erudite critical synthesis. The book thus delivers a far-reaching and perceptive critique that fills a long-standing gap between human rights studies and analyses of neoliberalism.

Whyte concludes that “[a] break with neoliberalism requires a break with the morals of the market” (242). As the world finds itself in a crisis yet again and market morality is back on the table, this appeal could not be timelier. Earlier in her analysis, Whyte also crucially points out that neoliberals perceived socialists and social democracy as threatening the moral underpinnings of the market. She does not assess, though, that while neoliberals were framing their explicitly moral claim, socialists drawing on Marxist tradition could not agree on whether criticizing neoliberalism could rely on moral grounds or not. Surely the disagreement and deep-seated skepticism towards moral arguments within different currents of socialist thought is another story to tell. Meanwhile, however, whether today’s political economists can articulate a moral vision relevant to Sankara’s call for a post-colonial economic justice is a pressing question. If this demand goes unanswered, there may well be a temporary break with neoliberalism, only to be followed by a reinvention that will again conform to the Mont Pèlerin Society’s “morals of the market.”

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Robert B. Reich, *The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It* (Penguin Random House, 2020), 224 pages.

Robert Reich’s new book, *The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*, is an indictment of the political structures that have created and maintain socioeconomic inequality in America, levelling an

accusatory finger at its new oligarchy: the wealthiest 1 percent that have usurped democracy for its own benefit. Over the past forty years, the rich have gotten richer, and have transformed their material advantage into political power. This agglutination of influence and wealth has left the majority of working-class Americans—in the author's memorable phrase—"shafted" (4).

Reich is a former Labor Secretary under Clinton, and if one discounts Thomas Piketty for being French, he is the closest the American left has to a celebrity economist (although his training is in law rather than economics). He is the author of punchy books for a popular audience with titles like *Saving Capitalism*, *Supercapitalism*, and *Aftershock*. *The System*, his nineteenth book, comes in at just under 200 pages, fitting neatly into this oeuvre.

Although Reich is decidedly progressive, *The System* is not about left/right or liberal/conservative divides; rather, it invites us to abandon our standard ideas of partisan struggle and think about politics *systemically*. According to Reich, the system works for the rich only, regardless of political ideology; the real contest is between democracy and oligarchy. From this perspective, political liberals like Warren Buffett and Barack Obama have embraced oligarchy as enthusiastically as David Koch and Donald Trump.

But Reich's *bête noire* is Jamie Dimon. Dimon runs the banking behemoth JPMorgan Chase, and also chairs the Business Roundtable, a lobbying group that represents America's wealthiest CEOs. For Reich, Dimon, a life-long Democrat, is emblematic of everything wrong with the system; his political identification distracts from the fact that he and his cronies are to blame for the plight of the average American. As CEO paychecks soared 940 percent between 1980 and 2019, workers' pay rose barely 12 percent, even while the average American now works more hours, saves less, and is leveraged up to their neck. Indeed, in the last twenty years, the US economy grew by 48 percent overall, but the typical household ended up with *less* wealth than it started. The richest 1 percent, on the other hand, more than doubled its wealth (127–28, 136–37).

What accounts for these disparities? Reich does not rely in his analysis on concepts such as ideology (for example, the term *neoliberal* does not appear once). Rather, for him everything is reducible to naked transactional politics. CEOs use any means necessary to benefit their shareholders, and understand legal fines, however large, as just another business expense. Moreover, they know that if their companies face real financial difficulty, the government will bail them out—what Reich calls "Socialism for the rich . . . harsh capitalism for the many" (52–53). This system is undergirded by the vast troves of money that the ultra-wealthy have shoveled into politics, on both sides: Dimon and his bank, for example, give generously to both Democrats and Republicans to ensure access to whomever is in power. In the 2018 midterms alone, JPMorgan Chase gave more than half a million dollars to both parties, and spent a further six million on lobbying (67). And, although Dimon and Chase are some of the largest corporate influencers in America, Reich argues that they are by no means outliers. Votes are bought. Deregulation is effectuated. Tax breaks are secured. And so on. All of this supports Reich's main argument: the idea of the "free market" is a myth perpetuated by those it benefits. "Governments don't intrude on the free market," says Reich; "governments organize and maintain markets" (93). The government sets the rules of the game, and because those rules are dictated to politicians by the 1 percent, they have the unsurprising effect of favoring vested interests.

Of course, none of this is new. Almost a century ago, Legal Realists, led by Robert Lee Hale, demonstrated how politics determines the distributive economic effects of legal rules, a point later hammered home by Critical Legal Studies scholars. The work of these scholars provides a specificity and texture that Reich's law-free analysis lacks. Reich acknowledges the role that law plays in supporting the vicious cycle of money in politics, but he frustratingly resorts to the passive

voice in explaining how this works: “Contract laws are altered . . . Securities laws are relaxed . . . Regulations that protect health, safety, and the environment are repealed, rolled back, riddled with exemptions, or simply not enforced” (94). Without an explication of the role of the legal system, Reich’s system is a black box: money in, legal rules out. Through its omissions, ironically, then, *The System* makes an argument for the value of a Law and Political Economy analysis.

Anyone who has been paying attention to American politics of late will be unsurprised by Reich’s arguments, but that is the point: the book is not for those that have been paying attention. *The System* is best understood as a general introduction to US political economy for those new to the subject—or those so deep in the trees that it might behoove them to step back and look at the forest. Even with its regular use of rhetorical devices calculated to engage a more popular audience—including puns and variants of the aforementioned verb “to shaft”—it is a lucid book, written with a clarity of prose and purpose, that provides a broad vantage point from which to see the overall structure of our political system. What it lacks is an account of the inner workings of legal institutions that might provide additional insights into exactly how our oligarchy functions.

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