***Book review for New Technology, Work and Employment***

*Marketization: How Capitalist Exchange Disciplines Workers and Subverts Democracy* (2022). Greer, I., & Umney, C. Bloomsbury Publishing. 192pp. £17.99

Greer and Umney’s *Marketization: How Capitalist Exchange Disciplines Workers and Subverts Democracy (2022)* is an excellent and timely book on the topic of marketization. The book synthesises Greer and Umney’s existing research on marketization, presenting a theoretical account of marketization which is articulated and substantiated through presentation of case study data. The book’s concise style and length means it is useful primer for academics on the topic of marketization, while being equally useful and relevant to students, and the general reader. The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 (a Theory of Marketization) provides an account of marketization across three chapters. Part 2 (Marketization in Practice) draws on empirical evidence from three case studies; welfare-to-work programmes (Chapter 4), healthcare (Chapter 5), and live music performances (Chapter 6). The final chapter (Chapter 7) looks beyond marketization, foregrounding resistance and alternatives.

Part 1 provides a clear introduction to the content of the book; it defines key terms used throughout and conceptualises marketization and its importance. The book details how market exchange – the precursors to marketization – occurs in a three-stage process. Firstly, commodification must occur; exchangeable goods need to be made comparable so their value can be quantified. Secondly, markets need to be opened to buyers and sellers to facilitate competition. Thirdly, transactions must occur frequently to maintain competitiveness (p.6-7). Marketization is thus defined as *‘the real-world mechanism through which the process of exchange is reorganised – whether by governments or by businesses – to bring these conditions about’* (p.7). The book goes on to further define marketization as ‘*a concrete administrative and organisational process that produces intensified competition on the basis of price’* (p.24). Marketization is understood as being different and distinct from privatisation as the creation of markets and market exchange can occur within public and voluntary organisations, as research on UK Higher Education has illustrated (Tholen, 2022). The book challenges the prevailing conceptualisation of free markets being at one end of a spectrum and strong interventionist state regulation existing at the other. Greer and Umney, drawing on Hilferding, note that states often intervene heavily in society to facilitate competition. This intervention has few limits and can have extreme social consequences, as Galeno famously noted in his description of South American neoliberal dictatorships, when he stated how *‘people were in prison so the prices could be free’* (1997).

Part 1 also examines the impact marketization has on society. Greer and Umney argue marketization is important as a specific process in capitalism because it manifests in the form of class discipline, wherein workers become disciplined by capital, expressed through competitive markets. The concept of class discipline is a central and important concept within the book; the concept informs understanding of subsequent empirical data by emphasising how power relations in society ought to be viewed through the prism of collective class relations stemming from the capitalist mode of production.

Greer and Umney do not merely detail what marketization is and how it operates, but also answer the important “so what?” question which must be asked of any research. The answer is that marketization – by expanding rule via undemocratic market exchange - is making the majority of people less powerful in society, and further empowering a small elite. The book’s argument is substantiated through a well-written theoretical literature review, which successfully explores the range of work emanating from critical researchers on the topic of marketization. Greer and Umney critique Foucauldian analyses of markets, which focuses too excessively on the individual impact of market forces on subjectivity in a manner which downplays class-based conflict (p.38; p.156). Similarly, neo-Marxist value-form analyses are also critiqued. While value theory is identified as useful for highlighting how class discipline manifests through the abstract power of exchange value as a criticism of capitalism, Umney and Greer argue it operates at ‘too high a level of abstraction’ (p.40) when deployed by contemporary value-form scholars. The result is analysis which is overly deterministic and tautologous, leading to vague, sweeping empirical claims and policy suggestions which at worst can become endorsements of the prevailing capitalist status quo (p.41).

Part 2 of the book provides evidence of marketization from three case study areas. Chapter 4, for example, explores the marketization of welfare-to-work programmes and active labour market policies (ALMPs) in general. Umney and Greer detaili their emergence in the US (where they often targeted racial minorities, in particular Black women), their development in the UK as workfare policies under Conservative and ‘New’ Labour governments, and their spread across Europe, beginning with the Hartz Reforms in Germany. This chapter does an excellent job of highlighting the complex, multi-faceted and contradictory nature of marketization as a process and its effect on the provision of commodity goods and services in capitalist societies. Attempts at marketization of ALMPs through tendering to private providers in the UK did not lead to increased efficiencies and better outcomes. Rather, what emerged was the ‘park and cream’ model in the form of the UK Work Programme, wherein easy to place jobseekers were found work by providers (therein realising easier profits, or skimming off the ‘cream’), whereas difficult jobseekers who were furthest from labour markets were ‘parked’, so as not to waste resources (p.87). Greer and Umney describe this as a ‘dual marketization’ process whereby users of services are exposed to both labour markets and market logics in wider society, and are also forced to interact with – and be disciplined by – marketised service providers (p.85-87).

Chapters 5 and 6 of the book go on to detail similar processes of contradictory marketization in the healthcare sector and in the live music sector. Chapter 5 draw on research conducted with the National Health Service (NHS) to illustrate how local commissioning groups have become tasked with facilitating marketization and competition in a manner which leads to perverse incentives emerging. One example is how spare capacity in hospitals – something which could be thought of as useful, especially in times of crisis – is seen as negative in a marketized system as bed usage is not operating at 100% efficiency, and therefore is not contributing to the fulfilment of quasi-market targets in the NHS, or generation of profits in private healthcare systems. Chapter 6 details similar processes of marketization in the live music industry. This case study emphasises the importance of technology for processes of marketization, specifically the use of digital, online platforms developed by digital intermediaries to facilitate competitive markets for live musicians and increase the scope for profitability (p.128-135). This case study reveals the limits of using technology to advance marketization, due to; the inherently fragmented and segmented nature of live music markets, the need for human oversight of transactions, and the difficulty of using technology to make comparable something as inherently qualitative and subjective as different forms of live music (p. 140-141).

The final Chapter of the book focuses on this question of resistance, and on what alternatives there are to processes of marketization. The book again foregrounds the significance of class discipline for understanding marketization, noting how changes in globalised, financialised capitalism have compelled states to pursue business confidence more forcefully, leading to class discipline as *‘an end in itself’* (p.146). Greer and Umney are rightly critical of centre-left political solutions which do not oppose marketization, but rather seek to manage it more effectively e.g. through anti-corruption initiatives (p.148), and progressive taxation (p.150-1). The latter is seen as a problematic solution as it does not address fundamental power inequalities. Viewed from a Marxist perspective, questions of taxation (and wages) focus narrowly on the sphere of realisation of capitalist profits and their distribution between capital and labour. The sphere of production – where value is produced by labour – is left unchanged. It is for this reason that Mazzacuto’s idea of an ‘entrepreneurial state’ (Mazzacuto, 2018) - which could progressively guide market investment and behaviour to benefit society - is rejected as a solution by Umney and Greer; such an approach would leave in place prevailing power relations and would likely allow the power of private capital to re-assert itself through future class disciplining (p.151-2).

Marketization is identified as requiring depoliticisation to function effectively, something which is helped by ‘quiet politics’; decision-making which occurs away from the public gaze. The book advocates ‘noisy politics’ and public engagement to challenge the marketization of services and sectors, as occurred with local challenges to NHS commissioning groups (p.153). While localism is not viewed as a panacea to depoliticisation, the book does offer conditional support to the potential for progressive anchor institutions and increased class power via trade unions as a way to challenge marketization (p.157). The book ends with a criticism of universal basic income (as it is too easily appropriated by marketised services) and instead offers a call for meaningful and dignified work, set within a wider appreciation of the essential humanity of individuals which should be at the core of class struggle.

Overall, Umney and Greer present a solid and well-reasoned theorisation marketization and evidencing its detrimental impact on society, while also offering a discussion of alternatives. It is unfortunate the book is of such short a length as a more detailed exploration of resistance and alternatives would have been welcome; there could easily have been an additional chapter examining this topic further. This criticism is however one which is applicable to much of the prevailing critical literature examining capitalist processes. All too often in critical work (academic or otherwise) notions of resistance and alternatives to contemporary capitalism are advocated in broad, abstract terms - for example calls for greater equality, or for a more equitable form of social organisations. These normative claims are generally not followed up with detailed, evidence plans or strategies for how alternatives can be achieved. It is too easy to engage in negative critique (saying what is wrong), but much harder to pursue progressive critique (explaining how things can be improved) (Rorty, 1998). A failure to offer detailed alternatives can lead to the counter-criticism that the present capitalist system, for all its limitations and contradictions, is the best we have. Greer and Umney offer a foundational ‘minimalist programme of action’ (p.160), but future work must now articulate precisely, and in detail, how sustainable alternatives can be organised. I suggest this work should include consideration of (a) how power relations operate and can undermine ostensibly progressive organisation like trade unions (b) how commodity goods and services will be produced and allocated without the predominance of market mechanisms, and (c) exactly what sort of society we, as individuals, wish to live in.

**References:**

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