

**JARED GIESBRECHT, *NETWORK DEMOCRACY*, MONTREAL,
KINGSTON, MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017**

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Western liberalism, and its continuous strive for ever increasing high-speed change to social and economic life, is presented as a sign of its progressive society. Consequences or effects of this progress are rarely questioned.¹ The recent increase in support for protectionism has put a dent to this ever increasing need to expand but, ironically, not the acceleration part of the equation. Both extremes still profess an inescapable hastening regardless of its impact on the future.² And this is where Jared Giesbrecht's *Network Democracy – Conservative Politics and the Violence of the Liberal Age* comes into play as he offers a critical social analysis of the effects of this constant drive for change in society including a narrative that offers a way out from the resulting erosion of liberalism.³

His analysis is centered on a comparison of two social dynamics models, liberalism's almighty free and rational individual and a network ecology oriented being whose functioning is more dependent on contingency and interplay with others. His exploration of moral and political thought surrounding this dichotomy also contains a generous portion of philosophy. Underlying this study is his objective: "This book is an attempt to help recover the critical spirit of conservatism and reemphasize the importance of stability and resilience in society."⁴ This was guided by his degrees in theology, philosophy, and law. He has a Ph.D. in law from the University of Victoria and practices in British Columbia.

The main subject of the book is a vulnerable being that is more in tune to his patterns of interaction with the outside, his network, than his atomic individuality. Unfortunately, liberalism's rational society is entrenched in an unresolved clash between individuating urges and the need to transcend difference by universalizing. The dominating standardizing procedures of our twenty-first century technology society violently break down resistance to this rapid shifting compulsion between extremes, disrupting the ability to understand and interact with each other and the surrounding world, which further isolates. The author adds that there is a need for intermediate structures to generate resistance and help stabilize society; giving it resilience against the dualistic logic of liberalism and its compulsion for control using

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¹ For a critique: Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004).

² For a description of acceleration, see Simon Glezos, *The Politics of Speed: Capitalism, the State and War in an Accelerating World* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

³ For an analysis of this erosion: John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2005).

⁴ Jared Giesbrecht, *Network Democracy – Conservative Politics and the Violence of the Liberal Age* (Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017) at 24.

a destabilizing acceleration in the name of efficiency. The author takes us through his treatise in six chapters, an introduction and a short conclusion.

The first chapter focuses on the definition of *res ecologia*, a human network ecology based on forming and reforming orderings that surround everyone: “The world is made up of nested patterns of material and immaterial network patternings that possess both stability and flux.”⁵ As each person is vulnerable to distortions to his network integrity, the interest with processes of persistent patterns is because they transcend the individual and enable resistance to structural violence inherent to modern liberalism and the market state. An example of this violence is the standardization of egalitarianism which problematizes difference. The language of network patternings also helps to focus on reconnecting with the historical foundations of the persistently vulnerable being which is also dependant on a continued interconnectedness to things both local and global. His moorings, the past and the future as foundation of identity, are being shredded by an accelerating world, namely in the area of communication: “Without sufficient continuity and resonance, our being will be fragmented and dominated by the tyranny of the now, we will be smothered by an oppressive immanence.”⁶ Time, as an abstract standardizing tool,⁷ has encased acceleration in the name of control and efficiency.

This leads to the second chapter where two effects of acceleration on power relations within *res ecologia* are analyzed: violence that disrupts network patternings and domination as an excessive use of this violence. Both being conceptualizations of power, it is the evaluation of excessiveness, a qualitative and normative factor, that is useful in framing the discourse as a critique, a practice suitable with democratic values. Used within an ecological approach, the inquiry is centered on the structural causation of effects where emphasis is on the flow and processes rather than on relations between fixed parts such as places and individuals. This results in a network system, viewed as a living and evolving organism, where movements and patterns have an effect on the overall behavior. The patternings are, therefore, auto-adjusting.⁸ Violence can then be equated to altering the fundamentals of the system, taking away its ability to adapt and change in response to its surroundings. As violence is a form of political action, a morally neutral one, it is in its excessive use that domination takes root, it disrupts the network. “Within a network/control society, however, this singularity [domination] is introduced within the agents themselves through the protocolic drive toward harmonization and universalization.”⁹ As these last two are tools of abstraction, they interfere with self-recognition and thus, they impede the creation of a link with the future, isolating and destabilizing.

⁵ *Ibid* at 26.

⁶ *Ibid* at 66.

⁷ See Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) at 55-56.

⁸ See Robert Ulanowicz, *Ecology, The Ascendent Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁹ *Giesbrecht, supra* note 4 at 95.

With the use of a network ecology framework, analysis of hidden structural violence becomes more discernable. In chapter three, an example of an excessively violent structural process is analyzed: protocolic domination. Protocol is a set of multilayered standardization procedures, originating in our technology intensive society, that oscillate rapidly between extremes: "The resilience that characterizes the autocatalytic processes of patternings is built upon genuine dependency and an asymmetry that is undermined by the rapidly shifting individual-universal polarity of protocol."¹⁰ This unresolved dualistic logic breaks down an individual's particularities in society as well as his political interactions with others and the world. It then reassembles them into a domination of the individual by the universal, disrupting and censoring all else. The synchronizing oscillations between both abstracted extremes, protocolic modulations, ensures that the self's relationships are continuously broken and realigned with the universal, "collapsing time and space"¹¹ in the process. "Rapid protocolic modulations destroy social cohesion and oppose individuals against each other by dividing each person within."¹² For the author, this leads to widespread individual mental illnesses which cannot be linked back to their causes because the required thought process to do so has been lost.¹³ Identification of such excessive violence is possible but any explanation will remain judgmental, limited to its effects, as protocolic modulations act on *res ecologia* itself, not on its specifics; it has been internalized. A non-dominating alternative is possible but it will require a new political economy.¹⁴

In the fourth chapter, liberalism is linked with a dualistic proceduralist logic where the quest for a good life has been replaced with the search for the right procedures to help bring together, thereby obscuring its normative foundation: "i.e. the search for the good is subsumed under a primarily proceduralist account of normative obligations."¹⁵ The author adds that this substitution is entrenched in liberalism's free and equal society political ideal. As society is subdivided into individuals and groups, which contrasts with an eco-system where the focus is on relations and the effects of social dynamics, it requires an individuation which separates from its environment. Being free to decide as an individual also implies the same with respect to the surrounding local community, disconnecting the actual dependencies. It also applies to the normative ideal of egalitarianism where its moral high ground negates the possibility of negotiation; a common practice of democracy and relationships. Both problematize difference, using logic of assimilation through universalized procedures, into a unifying abstract structure; resistance means

¹⁰ *Ibid* at 104.

¹¹ *Ibid* at 115.

¹² *Ibid* at 116. The author refers to Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1992) 59 October 1 at 5.

¹³ The author presents a similar issue with technology: George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Concord: House of Anansi Press, 1969) at 137-139.

¹⁴ An example from the author: J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Post-capitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁵ *Giesbrecht, supra* note 4 at 136. He adds that John Rawls' "veil of ignorance", Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" and Jürgen Habermas' "transcendental uncovering of the structures of communication" (at 143 and 158) lead inevitably to this proceduralist and dualistic logic.

exclusion.¹⁶ It also has consequences on moral judgment which requires historicity:¹⁷ “However, there is no patterning in dualism, there is only abstract and ahistorical standardizations – the tyranny of the now.”¹⁸ The author then moves on to discuss how three of the building blocks of liberalism are based on the same dualistic logic: the free market, the modern scientific method, and cosmopolitanism. They totalize consensus which is a distortion of democracy and pluralism. As an example, scientific fact is considered a given rather than created by humans; thereby hiding its relative nature based on consensus.

In chapter five, the author moves on from problematizing the dualistic logic of protocolic domination and offers barriers, using *res ecologia*'s viewpoint, including identifying when violation of patternings becomes excessive; i.e. legitimizing violence.¹⁹ First, as reason is power used to affect the self's patternings, it legitimizes violence that can render dominated or free. Legitimacy is then the use of such a power for greater freedom and resilience. He adds that self-interests and tradition are core factors influencing legitimate power use: “Thus, recognizing our inherent prejudices and the depth of their role within our understanding helps us to gain a more appropriate conception of ourselves as historically situated, interdependent beings and, therefore, a better awareness of our epistemo-logical situation.”²⁰ Secondly, with respect to freedom, it is political resistance, violence, that provides resilience to standardization within the connections of a network ecology; preventing their universalization. It disconnects excessively violent connections; it disagrees rather than tolerates by avoiding or confronting. The author warns: “In situations of significant power differentials between differing political communities, not only is deliberation doomed to descend into domination of the weaker community if it is unaccompanied by resistance, but resistance alone will also inevitably result in excessive violence.”²¹ And thirdly, reflexive legitimation of violence should be dealt with through redemptive politics where the objective is to change the nature of the relationship through the self rather than the other.

The author begins the last chapter, titled *Conservative Democracy*, with equating the logic of liberalism to “an idealist attempt to build a just society for all that transcends all.”²² He presents counter-actions to its dualistic logic, one that

¹⁶ The author references Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) at 5-8.

¹⁷ The author references Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) at 201.

¹⁸ *Giesbrecht, supra* note 4 at 140.

¹⁹ The author associates this to the caption “rough ground” of politics from: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1953) at 46.

²⁰ *Giesbrecht, supra* note 4 at 187; See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Historicity of Understanding” in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed, *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Oxford: Basil-Blackwell, 1986).

²¹ *Ibid* at 200-201.

²² *Ibid* at 211. The author proposes an analogy to a poem from T.S. Eliot, *The Rock* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company inc., 1934).

advocates a different social dynamic: the promotion of mutual support and restraint generating resilience and stability through intermediate structures. He adds that the reset must be done from within as the values of liberalism are the ones that have eroded everyone as well as institutions such as the state and the market.²³ The first counterbalance is justice by restoration. He defines it as a reflexive justice advocating interchange and resilience which: “serves as the inspiration for relational rights and duties within social and economic networks.”²⁴ The goal is to promote relationships over beings. An example is to forgive domination instead of retaliating. This represents a legitimate violent disruption to the network ecology.²⁵ The second barrier is the development of resilient relations within network patternings. To do so, the first step is the development of an ethic of non-domination. The second is the development of a society functioning outside of the state-market system but within this ethic. He then proceeds to describe ways to move beyond the state including its monopoly on violence, education and the rule of law; all of which are tools for universalization. He adds that the same ethics should apply to the liberal market place as it dominates with quasi-norms and disrupts through its own dualistic logic.²⁶ These two counter-actions functions within intermediate structures and civil enterprises; they represent the foundation of a stable and resilient society.²⁷

The book’s flow is linear as the author moves gradually from the definition of two contending models, to problematizing the social dynamics of liberalism, to offering barriers to the effects of its dualistic logic. He realistically notes that any headway will be slow for these barriers as they have to contend with liberalism’s domination. As with any alternative to such a dominating structure, the intermediate steps of a possible transition are the heart of the new contending model. The flow of such steps, which are few in this book, are critical to counter liberalism’s effects which have significantly impregnated society’s truths, blinding it to its issues. With respect to content, he doesn’t hesitate from doing an in-depth analysis if required, anchored with philosophical references, or boldly refuting the argumentation of liberalism’s main philosophers. His presentation of philosophical analysis is unequivocal and non-philosophers should not shy away. His treatise is original and offers, with good timing as liberalism is facing an important challenge from protectionism, an alternate and refreshing angle – *res ecologia* – for understanding the quagmire that we are facing. Just for his presentation of a contrasting social dynamics for society, which is different from the almighty individualism, it is worth the time spent reading. But, the book offers much more.

²³ See Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and the Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

²⁴ *Giesbrecht, supra* note 4 at 216.

²⁵ *Ibid* at 223.

²⁶ *Ibid* at 252. The author references Michael Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012) at 64-65.

²⁷ *Ibid* at 260.