

Book Review

***NO MONO. Capitalism without corporations*, by Walter Oswalt**

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Oswalt, Walter, *NO MONO. Kapitalismus ohne Konzerne. Für eine liberale Revolution* [NO MONO. Capitalism without corporations. For a liberal revolution] (Münster, Lit Verlag, 2017); 240 pp.; German; ISBN 978-3-8258-7256-4; URL <http://www.lit-verlag.de/isbn/3-8258-7256-4>

*'It is not about tackling the so-called abuses of economic power,
but rather about economic power itself.'*

Walter Eucken

The publicist and philosopher Walter Oswalt has made the question of how to limit and control power in modern societies his life's work. Born in 1959, Oswalt studied philosophy under Karl Popper in Vienna, then represented the Green Party in Frankfurt's city council, and worked recently as journalist and scientific advisor for ATTAC, an organisation involved in the anti-globalization movement. In many ways his thoughts follow those of his grandfather Walter Eucken, a German economist who established a school of thought called Ordoliberalism during the 1930s. Ordoliberal thinking combined ideas about economic organisation with aspects of social philosophy, ethics and religion. As part of this 'Ordo' programme, Eucken developed radical anti-monopoly policy proposals that are hitherto largely unpublished but stored by Oswalt in the Walter-Eucken-Archive in Frankfurt.¹ While modern Ordoliberals have assimilated into mainstream economics Oswalt follows his grandfather's radical-liberal tradition. Eucken's comment about power at the top of this review also prefaces NO MONO and captures the essence of Oswalt's work. This review summarises NO MONO, discusses its weaknesses and strengths, and illustrates the applicability of its conclusions.

1. Small is beautiful: the central argument

NO MONO's basic premise is that 'capitalist oligopolies' evade the political sphere, defy competition in the marketplace and destroy the environment because economic power is not effectively limited. In five essays, the book conceptualises an

¹ Peukert, E. (2000). Walter Eucken (1891–1950) and the Historical School. In P. Koslowski (ed), *The Theory of Capitalism in the German Economic Tradition* (p. 130). Hannover, Germany: Springer.

economic order that counteracts this concentration of power. The first essay demands that one should 'act in such a way that in all that you do, [...] no more power is exercised by people over people than is unavoidable' (p. 28). Oswald derives nine practical implementations of this anti-monopoly imperative ranging from the removal of patents to rules for woodland development without human influence. The second essay discusses the state-market relationship: according to Oswald, the state should develop framework conditions for markets 'with the same rationality and care as computer chips, medical devices or transport networks' (p. 66) so that markets become social spaces where people interact with a minimum of hierarchies and a maximum of diversity. The issue is not whether we need 'more market' or 'less market' since only the oligopoly-free market is democracy-compliant (p. 89). The third essay, a history of liberal political thought, rediscovers the perspective of the 'great revolutions:' referring to the radical liberal levellers in the English Revolution, the supporters of egalitarian capitalism in the young US, and the early supporters of individualist socialism in France, Oswald develops proposals for a radical-democratic social contract (pp. 143ff.). Building on the previous essay, the fourth criticises the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) and presents twelve proposals for a new EU-constitution that guarantees equality of power (pp. 174ff.). The fifth essay deals with questions of civilization theory. In contrast to Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, Oswald does not see the development of our civilization as an inevitable process of centralization. Reflecting on Karl Jasper's 'Achsenzeit'² and the developments of Judaism (pp. 215ff.), Oswald claims that civilisation progresses by taming political and economic power.

2. Ordoliberalism ≠ Neoliberalism: contribution to the literature

Given the subject's wide nature and NO MONO's mere 234 pages of essayistic analysis Oswald's approach can easily be criticised for its cursory inspection, frequent shortage of references to related literature, and occasionally sensationalist language. Given that supportive data are often missing, the informative graphics on pp. 93-103 are a noteworthy exception. Oswald prefers to focus on the idea-historical and philosophical foundations of his anti-monopoly policies, while circumventing the more problematic question of political implementation. Having said that, scholars of economic and political thought will benefit from the fact that Oswald provides a unique interpretation of Ordoliberalism that corrects several misunderstandings that characterise previous literature.³ While many scholars reading about the Ordoliberal concept of a 'strong state' suspect a close proximity to National Socialism,⁴ Oswald's state conception is linked to ideas about democracy and minimisation of power (pp. 89ff.). Some critics understand

² Jaspers argues that the main ideas of the great cultures were born between 800-200 BCE (*Achsenzeit*), leading to a structural break in the history of humankind.

³ Also: Oswald, W. (2001). *Die falschen Freunde der offenen Gesellschaft*. In W. Eucken, *Wirtschaftsmacht und Wirtschaftsordnung* (pp. 87-152). Münster, Germany: LIT.

⁴ Haselbach, D. (1991). *Autoritärer Liberalismus und soziale Marktwirtschaft. Gesellschaft und Politik im Ordoliberalismus*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos.

Ordoliberalism merely as a prelude to the later Neoliberal revolution.⁵ This fails to recognize that Ordoliberals did not aspire to grant the economy an absolute power over society, but rather advocated a power limitation within the economic sphere to guarantee everybody's freedom. This understanding of competition as a means to an end and not an end in itself is present throughout NO MONO, for example in Oswald's discussion of 'achievement competition' (p. 91). Although Ordoliberalism is often subsumed under the category of Neoliberalism Oswald stresses the differences between these schools of thought (pp. 85f., 121ff.).

3. Beyond 'I Like:' implications

A final example illustrates the applicability of Oswald's considerations. On the day of the 2010 US Congressional elections, each relevant *Facebook* user received an automatic message inviting her or him to vote. For the moment, this procedure may appear unproblematic, but it raises – in a very Ordoliberal sense – the issue of power. 0.39% of the notified users went to the election solely due to this *Facebook* message,⁶ that is hundreds of thousands of people. Following the social network's recent *Cambridge Analytica* scandal *Facebook*'s status as quasi-monopolist has been highlighted and calls for tougher regulation have become louder. NO MONO increases awareness of such topics at the interface of economic and political power. By insisting on its radical-liberal origins Oswald is assigning Ordoliberalism to the academic periphery. However, it may be from this position that Ordoliberal thought is most inspiring.

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⁵ Starting with: Foucault, M. (2006). *Die Geburt der Biopolitik. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität II. Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1978/1979*. Frankfurt a.M., Germany: Suhrkamp.

⁶ Bond, R. et al. (2012, 13 September). A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization. *Nature*, 489, 295-8.